WIDE RECEIVERS ISSUE

ESPN



ANTONIO BROWN'S FLIPPIN' UNBELIEVABLE ROUTE TO GREATNESS

BY MINA KIMES

ALSO STARRING

T.Y. HILTON

DeANDRE HOPKINS

BRAXTON MILLER

... AND GRONK?

PLUS

KEVIN GARNETT GOES STRONG

BY JACKIE MacMULLAN

JAHLIL OKAFOR GOES IT ALONE

BY ROBERT SANCHEZ



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WIDE RECEIVERS

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No way Antonio Brown was going to pose without a fresh cut.



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COVER PHOTOGRAPH AND THIS PAGE BY PETER YANG

HAIR: THOMAS BOYD; GROOMING: BETHANY MONTECALVO



Creature Comforts

Contributing photographer Dylan Coulter on DeAndre Hopkins' tiniest fear: "I enjoyed photographing DeAndre Hopkins. He was gracious with his time and interested in making great photos. His good spirits were particularly appreciated on this shoot because it was an unusual one. To highlight the size of his hands, we had him holding lots of little animals: a piglet, a chick, a kitten and a mouse. He put on a brave face for all but the mouse, which he wasn't so sure about. In the end, he obliged, although his concern turned out to be justified: The mouse relieved himself on his hand. I asked him if he had ever been part of a shoot like this. He replied: 'Have you ever been on a shoot like this?' Ha! Touché. Nope, that was a first for me as well." MORE ON PAGE 84

For pics of Hopkins and cute critters like his dog, Yogi, go to es.pn/hopkinshands

Senior writer Jackie MacMullan on the search for Kevin Garnett



"I knew better than to tell Kevin Garnett I was coming to Minnesota. He's notoriously and maddeningly elusive: He once made me fly to Chicago to conduct an interview, even though we lived 10 miles from each other in Boston. This time, he acknowledged my arrival in Minneapolis with a swift hug—and I didn't see him again for two days. On Day 3, he materialized, without warning, welcoming me in his staccato 'Hey-your-hair-is-different-I-watch-you-on-that-show-slick-boots!-what-do-you-hear-from-Paul-[Pierce]?-let's-go!' And off we went." MORE ON PAGE 13

Senior writer Mina Kimes on T.Y. Hilton and Antonio Brown



"Despite being friends, T.Y. Hilton and Antonio Brown couldn't be more different when it comes to style. When I went to T.Y.'s house, he answered the door in a soft T-shirt, shorts and socks covered with little cartoon pumpkins. Antonio, on the other hand, showed up in a super stylish all-black getup. I was surprised because his hair wasn't molded into his signature Lego-block hairstyle; he told me it isn't a cut but that he shapes it with a straightening iron. I heard it took an hour to get it just right for *The Mag*'s photo shoot." MORE ON PAGE 50

NFL analyst Matt Bowen on the relentless Rob Gronkowski



"As a former NFL safety, I have to wonder how defenses today even begin to stop Rob Gronkowski. The truth here? There is no scheme that translates to the field when Gronkowski runs routes from just about any alignment. And with Tom Brady at the helm, he is unstoppable. In this piece, I wanted to show how the Patriots are using Gronkowski, making him a movable piece in the offense, to simply toy with the rest of the league. He's the biggest and strongest guy on the playground—and NFL defenses can't find a blueprint to shutting him down." MORE ON PAGE 66

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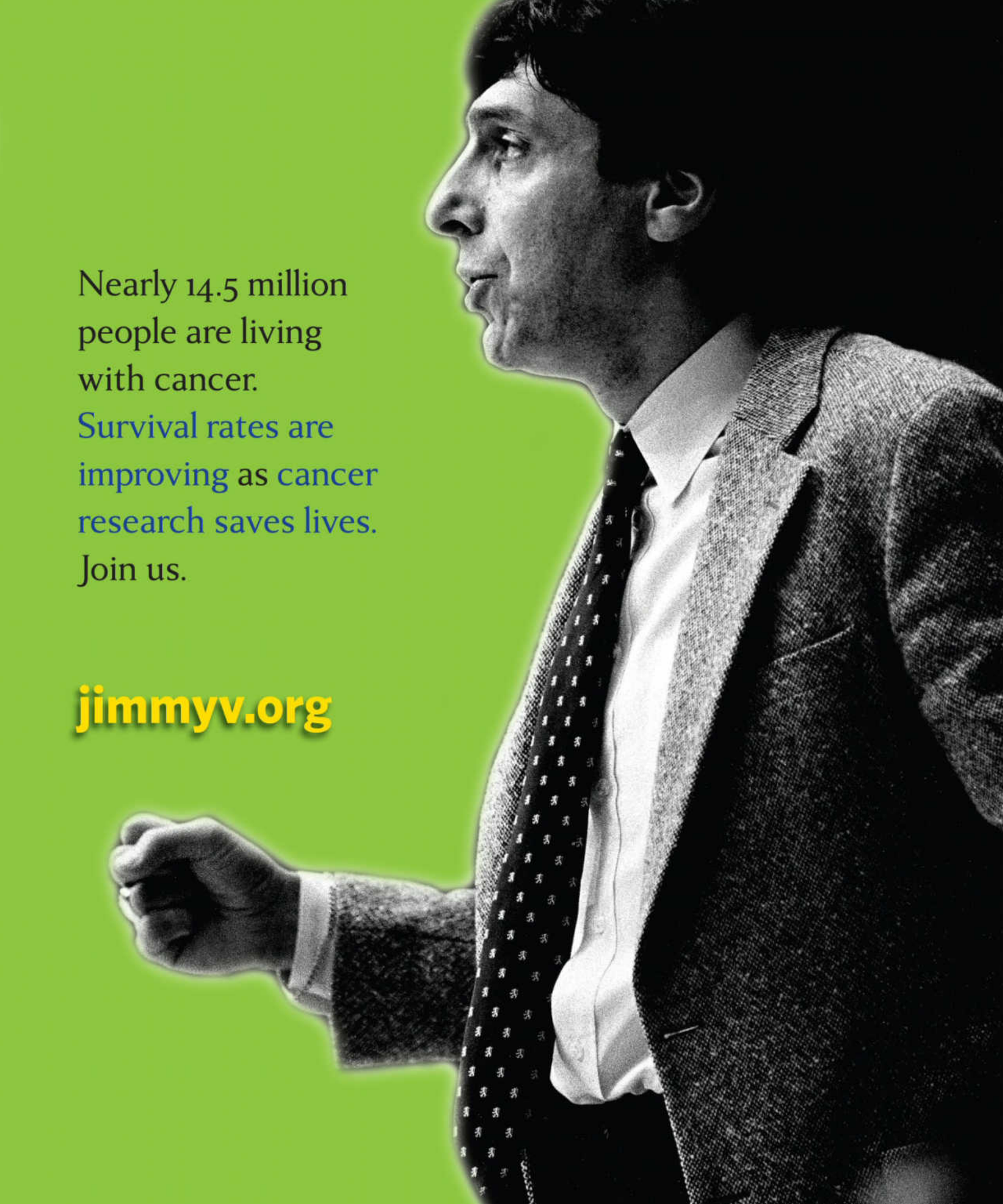
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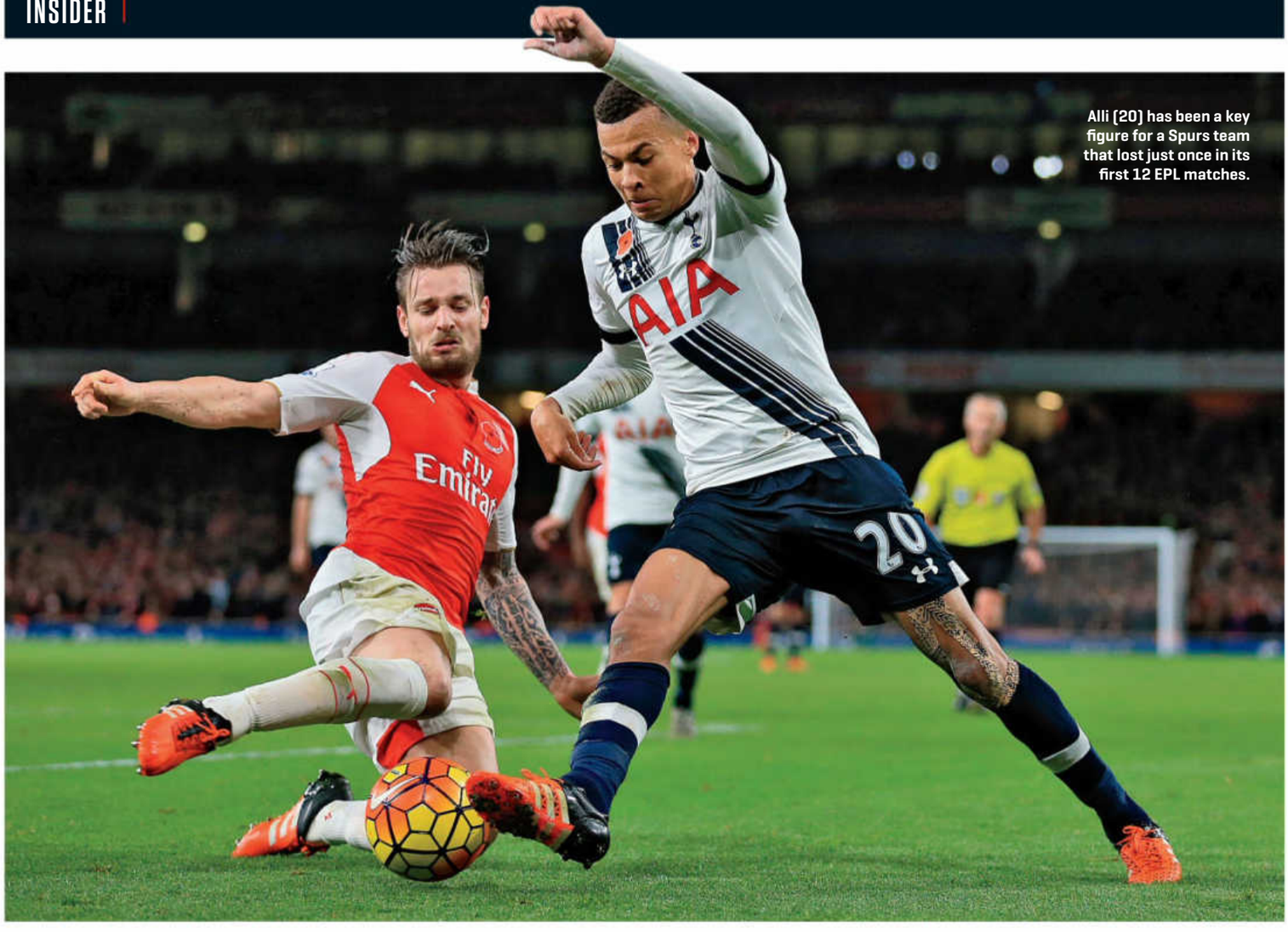
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Alli (20) has been a key figure for a Spurs team that lost just once in its first 12 EPL matches.

Check Your Programme Premier League's young stars

ESPN Insider Terry Burton names his four breakout youngsters from the first few months of the EPL season.

Dele Alli

MIDFIELDER | TOTTENHAM

The 19-year-old has two goals and has showcased the array of skills that made him a huge prospect. Alli is a two-way midfielder who generates scoring opportunities with smart, well-timed runs and shows a willingness to work and tackle back. He debuted for England in October against Estonia, then scored in just his fourth cap, and first start, against France.

Jack Butland

GOALKEEPER | STOKE CITY

The Bristol-born keeper has excelled for Stoke in his first season as a full-time starter in the EPL. Butland, 22, leads the Prem with 50 saves and has been in goal for every minute of league play for the Potters. His decision-making has been a huge factor in his success: He knows when to come off his line to intercept dangerous crosses and when to stay home and protect the goal.

Brendan Galloway

DEFENDER | EVERTON

A product of the MK Dons academy, 19-year-old Galloway is now a regular starter after debuting for the Toffees late last season. His physical ability makes him special, as he has the pace to recover from a mistake before damage is done. He ranks third on Everton with 20 tackles but rarely fouls, getting his distances right and waiting for the precise moment to go in for a tackle.

Jeff Schlupp

MIDFIELDER | LEICESTER CITY

The 22-year-old Ghana international has played at left back and on the left wing for LCFC. Schlupp's pace helps him deal with one-on-one situations in defense and blow past opponents when going forward. Schlupp has scored just once, but his versatility and power are central to an attack that ranks second in the EPL with 25 goals.

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DILLARD'S AND DILLARDS.COM



BY PETER KEATING



Strength in Numbers Blinded by wins and losses, the College Football Playoff selection committee is paying little heed to schedule strength. Here's why that's bad.

This college football season certainly has had its share of thrilling Saturdays, but as someone who believes in the smart use of analytics, its Tuesdays are driving me crazy. In 2014, the College Football Playoff selection committee ably seeded the country's strongest teams into its brackets. But this year, with tougher decisions to make, we're back to the "eye test," BCS-style politics and a very real chance that deserving teams will find themselves stranded outside the top four—all because the committee has avoided the best statistical methods of measuring schedule strength.

Any ranking seems to force a fundamental choice: Are we interested in finding the "most deserving" team, which has compiled an impressive record, or the "best" one, which has the greatest chance to win? I would argue, however, that these two questions are actually the same. The most deserving team *is* the best team, provided you adjust for clubs' dominance and strength of schedule. In 2012, for example, Alabama (12–1) blew the doors off its regular season, outscoring opponents by an outrageous 361 points. Meanwhile, Notre Dame went undefeated by eking out five wins by a touchdown or less, including three against unranked opponents. That record (and history and their fan base) likely landed the Irish a title shot, but most analytics systems saw them, even at 12–0, as unworthy of a championship bid. The Crimson Tide pulverized Notre Dame in the BCS final 42-14.

As fans, our lizard brains want to claim that wins and losses are all that matter, but you know that's not true. Take a moment and see just how many teams you can name off the top of your head that are better—or, if you prefer, more deserving of a superior bowl bid—than the Houston Cougars. Past performance is predictive, but only if we interpret it properly.

Last year the CFP selection committee seemed to not only understand but explicitly state the importance of schedule strength by booting TCU from its final four. This season, however, gaudy "W" totals have blinded the committee. Its first two releases ranked Baylor No. 6 in the country even though the Bears built their 8–0 record against the five worst programs in the Big 12, plus Rice, SMU and Lamar. (What, Incarnate Word wasn't available?) Baylor then lost to Oklahoma, a result deemed an upset by most of the world but not by anyone paying attention to strength of schedule.

Oklahoma State is in the CFP's top 10 (through Week 11) despite opposition nearly as weak as Baylor's. Ditto for Iowa. Ohio State, which spent most of its nonconference schedule stifling yawns against Hawaii and Western Michigan, is in the CFP top four even though committee members haven't been particularly impressed with the Buckeyes. "We think they're a team that probably hasn't played its best yet," chairman Jeff Long said after the second week of rankings. "We think their best games are in front of them." Translation: The committee is grading Ohio State not on results but on its hope that another Urban Meyer team will have a great finish.

Here's a thought: The selection committee should adopt some honest-to-goodness analytics to assess strength of schedule. The simplest way to do this is literally called the simple rating system (SRS), which mathematically answers the question of how strong every team in the country would have to be for all the scores, week by week, to come out the way they did, then expresses the results in points above or below average. SRS is part of ESPN's Football Power Index, and its strength-of-schedule ratings are also broken out at sports-reference.com. There are other valid standards too, such as asking how likely it is that an elite team would go undefeated against a given club's schedule, the method adopted by Brian Fremeau of ESPN Insider and Football Outsiders.

Any reasonable, comprehensive measure of schedule strength would be better than cherry-picking quality wins and dubious losses. Such a measure would suggest the committee is overrating Iowa and severely underrating Stanford (through Week 11). Statistics don't have to trump observation, but we all need data to check the eye test and hedge against favoritism.

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FORWARD



ROOKIE WATCH

The Cruel Tutelage of Kevin Garnett

Karl-Anthony Towns boasts the skills to be one of the best big men in basketball. He just needs to survive his mentor first.

BY JACKIE MacMULLAN

DAVID SHERMAN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES



His playing time is limited, but make no mistake: Garnett is the nexus of this rebuilding effort.

Watching was wasteful, he thought, counterintuitive. Kevin Garnett loathed it. He'd spit at anyone who implored him to embrace it, even as his balky knee howled for a respite. Watching, to Garnett, implied vulnerability. It undercut his contention that he could go harder, longer, better than these fledglings who thought they knew it all.

Garnett actually knew. Greatness—the pursuit of it—was slippery, elusive, dependent on myriad variables, like health, conditioning, team chemistry, luck. But some components shouldn't be left to chance, and preparation was one of them. "Kevin had this belief that if you were the leader, you couldn't miss one snap of practice," says Doc Rivers, who coached Garnett in Boston from 2007 to 2013. "But I had this belief that you are 30-whatever and I need you for the whole season."

And so in February 2009 the coach sat down his future Hall of Famer. Not to skip a game. Rivers just wanted him to miss a *practice*.

"Coach, you don't understand," Garnett seethed. "If I'm sitting, they will see weakness."

Relegated to the practice-facility sideline, pacing, growling and cursing to himself, Garnett pulled up suddenly, an idea churning, a maniacal grin creasing his face. He unleashed a howl; his teammates glanced in his direction. They knew something was about to happen.

This was, after all, the superstar who had once dropped to all fours and barked at Portland rookie point guard Jerryd Bayless; whose pregame ritual was a violent head-banging assault of, and concurrent conversation with, the basketball stanchion; who would years later express his umbrage at Dwight Howard's post play by drilling him with an impromptu head-butt in the first quarter of a 2015 regular-season game against Houston.

Garnett, forbidden to take the floor by his own coach, had concocted his revenge: He would track the movements of power forward Leon Powe, the player who had replaced him in the lineup. As Powe pivoted, so did Garnett. As Powe leaped to grab a defensive rebound, Garnett launched himself to corral an imaginary ball. As Powe snapped an outlet pass, Garnett mimicked the motion, then sprinted up his slim sliver of sideline real estate as Powe filled the lane on the break. The players were mirror images: one on the court with a full complement of teammates, the other out of bounds, alone. Two men engaged in a bizarre basketball tango.

"KG," Rivers barked, "if you keep doing this, I'm canceling practice for the whole team. That will hurt us."

Garnett's reverence for coaches was legendary, but still he turned his back on Rivers. He returned to his defensive stance, an isotope of intensity, crouched, palms outstretched, in complete concert with Powe. He was, in fact, becoming so adept at this warped dalliance he'd invented, he actually began to anticipate Powe's movements, denying the entry pass to his



invisible opponent before Powe thought of it.

Finally, an exasperated Rivers blew the whistle. "Go home," Rivers instructed his team, then he glared at Garnett. "I hope you're happy."

Garnett was far from happy. He was, at best, resolute. He'd told his teammates countless times that there was no such thing as a day off. Why couldn't Doc understand that the most effective way for him to lead was to show his teammates how it's done? "Let's work!" he screamed to his departing teammates, pounding his chest. *"Let's work!"*

Powe and the others wandered off, mystified.

"'What is he doing?' That's what we were saying," Powe recalls today. "And at that point you start wondering, *Is KG maybe a little crazy after all?*"

THE MADDEST PROFESSOR

What we know: Kevin Garnett is unbelievably intense. What we don't know: whether such a man can succeed in mentoring those who might not be.

NOVEMBER 2000
Tension between Garnett and teammate Wally Szczerbiak—over a screen and poor D—boils into a full-on brawl. Punches are thrown.

MAY 2004
Before Game 7 of the conference semis, KG declares: "I'm loading up the Uzis. I've got a couple M-16s, a missile launcher. I'm ready for war."

JUNE 2008
During an on-court interview after the Celtics' 2008 title win, KG unleashes his most famous roar: "Anything's possible ... *ANYTHING'S POSSIBLE!!!*"

DECEMBER 2008
Defending an inbounds play, KG, on all fours, literally barks at Portland's Jerryd Bayless. Says ESPN's Mark Jackson: I've never seen anything like that before."

NOVEMBER 2010
Detroit's Charlie Villanueva, who has alopecia universalis (rendering him hairless), tweets that Garnett called him a cancer patient during the game.

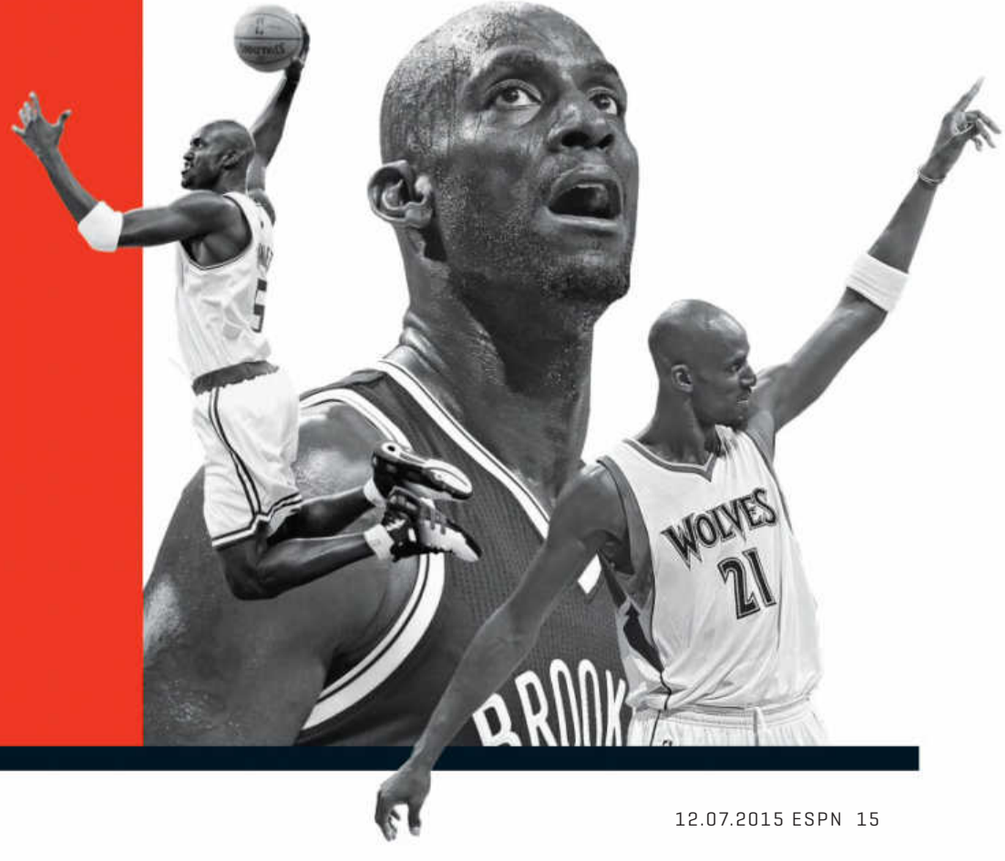
JANUARY 2011
During the fourth quarter of a game against Phoenix, Garnett appears to intentionally slap the Suns' Channing Frye in the groin as Frye shoots a 3.

DECEMBER 2013
KG's particularly foulmouthed reaction to a call in a Christmas Day game against the Bulls forces a courtside fan to cover the ears of a nearby child.

NOVEMBER 2014
During a fourth-quarter defensive series against the Bulls, center Joakim Noah, who was guarding Garnett, claims KG attempted to bite his hand.

DECEMBER 2014
After accusing Indiana's David West of flopping, Garnett channels his rage by blowing in West's right ear. A fracas ensues, and a tech is called ... on West.

JANUARY 2015
Garnett, frustrated by a foul call and post-whistle nudge from Dwight Howard, hurls the ball at D12, then head-butts him. KG is ejected.



FROM LEFT: JORDAN JOHNSON/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; WINSLOW TOWNSON/AP IMAGES; JOE MURPHY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; JORDAN JOHNSON/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

FORWARD



Garnett's final project? Turning Wiggins and Towns into the dynamic duo he and Stephon Marbury never were.

WITH AS MUCH as we talk about "mentors" in sports, it's arguable whether they even exist. The notion that veteran stars might willingly groom younger players to supplant them is naive at best, misguided at worst. Witness Carmelo Anthony welcoming a young Jeremy Lin into the Knicks' rotation, or Kobe Bryant's struggle to confront his own mortality while ostensibly shepherding D'Angelo Russell, or whatever it is that Michael Jordan did with (or to) Kwame Brown.

Rivers knows how rare true mentorship can be. "You have to get ones who are ready to let go of who they were and be what you need them to be now," he says. So it is that Minnesota's decision to entrust No. 1 pick Karl-Anthony Towns to the tutelage of Kevin Garnett is, to put it mildly, a compelling and sizable gamble.

When the Wolves acquired Garnett this past February, before Towns had been drafted, they took on a 38-year-old with a $12 million salary and a history of knee problems. Flip Saunders was the driving force behind the decision to bring KG into the fold, citing Garnett's ability to flourish as a rookie under the watchful eye of former teammate Sam Mitchell, who is now the Timberwolves' interim coach. The idea was to pay that experience forward. Garnett, who signed a new two-year, $16.5 million guaranteed deal after he arrived, is the first to concede that his value is no longer to produce on the court. The Wolves are banking on his intangibles: the work ethic, the experience, the ability to motivate. Garnett, for his part, says Towns reminds him much of himself at the same age. "His confidence might be a little higher than mine was at this point," he says. "It's modern day. Kids are exposed to so much more. Karl listens. He's smart, but like so many young players, he likes to think he knows a lot. He's got a lot of swag. So that's what's up. We'll deal."

Former teammate Chauncey Billups maintains that Garnett is the most unselfish superstar of his era and the most dynamic leader he has seen. Then again, if Towns is devoured by KG's fire, he wouldn't be the first. A partial list of ex-teammates who have endured the wrath of the Big Ticket includes Glen "Big Baby" Davis, Mason Plumlee, Ray Allen, Wally Szczerbiak, Rajon Rondo, Rasho Nesterovic, Patrick O'Bryant and Deron Williams. Some have survived to be welcomed into Garnett's inner circle; others are forever dead to him. "If you don't meet his expectations," says Celtics president of basketball operations Danny Ainge, "he has no use for you."

Rivers, whose eyes still water when he attempts to articulate what Garnett has meant to him, says that before he coached him, he considered Garnett's ferocity to be contrived. Then he watched Big Baby Davis and the Celtics' subs nearly blow a 25-point lead against the Trail Blazers on Dec. 5, 2008, their third game in five nights. During a timeout with 6:04 remaining, with Boston's lead whittled to 13, Rivers watched Garnett, mid-diatribe, grab Davis, who was standing with hands on his hips, head down, several feet from the huddle. He listened as Garnett undressed Davis and the reserves for blowing what should have been an insurmountable advantage, forcing the starters to return to the game. Afterward, Davis, then in his second year, retreated to the end of the bench, snapped his towel onto the floor and wept.

Nobody—not even Allen and Paul Pierce—were immune from KG's outbursts. And although Garnett counts Rondo, whom he played with for six seasons in Boston, among his closest friends, he didn't hesitate to boot the point guard from practice if he felt Rondo was going through the motions. According to Rivers, that happened more than once. "He'd tell Rondo, 'Get the f--- out! You're not playing defense!'" Rivers says. "He told him the truth. Rondo needed more of that."

That intensity followed him to the arena, where Garnett systematically ratcheted himself into a force to be reckoned with, both by the opposition and his teammates. "When Kevin came through those doors on game day, he was angry," says Celtics guard Avery Bradley, who played with Garnett for three seasons. "We couldn't laugh, talk, listen to music. We'd all hide in the training room or the bathroom—wherever KG wasn't."

Billups, who teamed with Garnett in Minnesota from 2000 to '02, says one of his most vivid

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memories of Garnett is from a Timberwolves shootaround in which Saunders tried to familiarize the team with its next opponent. The coach attempted to run through that team's offensive sets for the starters but was thwarted by Garnett, who refused to stop denying his player the ball during the walk-through. "I warned KG," Billups says. "I told him, 'You keep yelling this s--- at people and someone is going to come back at you.'"

That guy, Billups says, was former Wolves teammate Wally Szczerbiak. "I got along with Wally just fine, but he was kind of a know-it-all," Billups says. "I took his arrogance to be a positive all players gotta have, but KG took it a different way. It was KG's team, his voice, his show, his everything. Anyone who differed was going to be an outcast."

The tension boiled over during a November 2000 practice, when Szczerbiak reportedly got picked off and chided Garnett to call out the screens. KG responded curtly, "Play some defense," the pickoff seemingly a consequence for whatever expectation Szczerbiak wasn't meeting defensively. Szczerbiak took exception. It accelerated into a shouting match, which spilled into the training room. Punches were thrown. Ask Szczerbiak about it today and he says he was simply a young player trying to stick up for himself. "I felt like I had some leadership qualities," he says. "I'm not a guy who will take a back seat all the time, and in certain scenarios I'm going to speak up for what's right. At times it definitely got me in trouble."

Worth noting: the fact that Szczerbiak and Garnett played six-plus seasons together and were teammates in the 2002 All-Star Game. "We figured it out," Szczerbiak says.

Others weren't so lucky.

Consider former Celtic Patrick O'Bryant, the ninth pick in the 2006 draft. Early in the 2008-09 season, O'Bryant was putting in some post work with Celtics assistant coach Clifford Ray after practice when Garnett summoned him to the other end of the floor. KG wanted to light a fire under the young center, who he felt was too placid. Garnett immediately began berating O'Bryant, criticizing him mercilessly. When O'Bryant didn't react, KG pushed harder. Still nothing. Garnett walked off the court in disgust.

"You know how he is," O'Bryant says. "He was yelling and screaming, trying to get me to scream back, but that's not who I am. I don't need to yell at someone all the way down the court after I dunk. Just because I didn't have a mean look on my face didn't mean I wasn't listening."

From that day forward, those close to the team say, Garnett would go out of his way to bully O'Bryant. Normally a pass-first player, KG would take the ball forcefully to the hole if O'Bryant was guarding him in practice. He subjected him to a nonstop stream of insults to break him. "Patrick would miss a shot, and he'd just torture him," Powe says. "Kevin wasn't going to forgive him. He'd talk crazy to him. We told Patrick, 'Don't let him get under your skin,' but it was too late." Twenty-six games into his Celtics career, on Feb. 19, 2009, Boston traded O'Bryant, who today maintains he learned a lot from Garnett and doesn't remember being bullied, to Toronto for a 2014 second-round pick. He would play just 24 more games in his NBA career.

"Kevin destroyed him," Rivers says. "It was mean-spirited."

"Just because someone doesn't play with the same fire as KG, it doesn't mean they're soft," Billups says. "It also doesn't mean they don't care, but in KG's raving, crazy mind, that's how he sees it. If he sees something one time, that's what he believes in, no matter what. That's not always great for a leader, I admit that, but that's who he is."

It was for that reason, Ainge says, that he was careful which young players he entrusted to Garnett—and why Minnesota's plan might be less than foolproof. Sometimes a player came in, Ainge says, "and it was a little scary to have KG around him. His work ethic was unquestioned, but he could be intimidating—and destructive—if the player didn't respond in the right way."

"I always say, 'I'm not stepping on someone who doesn't want to be stepped on,'" Garnett says. "Because this is a no-nonsense league. If you're not in it, and I mean *in it* today, then they will replace you tomorrow."

ELEVEN GAMES INTO the career of Karl-Anthony Towns, it was clear: He is the future of the Timberwolves. The ex-Kentucky Wildcat had demonstrated the requisite skills of the prototypical modern big man: a two-way, mobile 7-footer with post skills, range that extends to the perimeter and shot-blocking ability. The Wolves were a better-than-expected 5–6 through those first 11 games, and Towns was averaging 15.4 points and 10.5 rebounds on 49 percent shooting. The only rookies to eclipse those numbers over the past 30 years? Shaquille O'Neal and David Robinson.

It's a good thing too. Minnesota's 2015-16 roster is a confluence of veterans who seem a tad too old

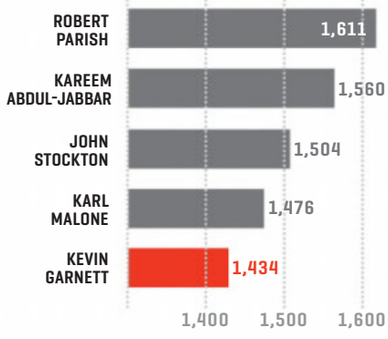
KEVIN GARNETT BY THE NUMBERS

CAREER PLUS-MINUS

Garnett ranks 13th all time in box-score plus-minus,* ahead of Karl Malone, Julius Erving, Shaquille O'Neal and Hakeem Olajuwon.

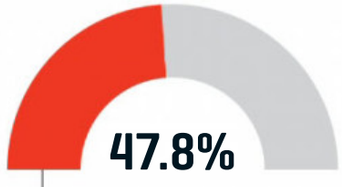
+5.44

CAREER REGULAR-SEASON GAMES PLAYED



CAREER WINS, FROM DEFENSE

Of the top 10 players in career win shares, Garnett ranks second, behind Tim Duncan, in the percentage of them resulting from D.



Almost half of Garnett's WS come from his elite defense.

*Box-score plus-minus shows the points per 100 possessions that a player is above or below league average. Stats through Nov. 17.

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FOR MORE INSIGHT ON THE 2015-16 NBA ROOKIE CLASS, VISIT ESPN.COM/INSIDER

(with 35-year-old Tayshaun Prince and 39-year-old Andre Miller joining KG) and a nucleus of Towns, Andrew Wiggins, Ricky Rubio and Zach LaVine, who appear a speck too young. Garnett, now 39 and in his 21st season, had returned to the franchise that drafted him in June 1995, five months before Towns was born. Injuries limited Garnett to just 98 minutes in a Minnesota uniform last season, but the Timberwolves produced an eye-popping 93.8 defensive rating when he was on the floor. This year's blueprint called for more of the same—for Garnett to spawn a defensive culture in a starting role alongside Towns, Wiggins and Rubio. And through those first 11 games, the results were encouraging. Minnesota's defensive rating with Garnett on the floor was a sterling 92.2. Off the floor? A less-so 105.1.

In July, KG showed up in Las Vegas to watch the young pups in the NBA's summer league and agreed to participate in an informal workout with Wiggins, small forward Shabazz Muhammad and center Gorgui Dieng, each of whom wasn't on the summer league roster. The players secured a gym, a bus and an 8 a.m. start time. But when the trio arrived at Bishop Gorman High, Muhammad's alma mater, Garnett was already there, drenched in sweat, muttering to the basketball, bobbing and weaving like a championship fighter. He'd been there, according to Timberwolves owner Glen Taylor, since 6 a.m.

"I thought y'all wanted to be good!" KG scolded his teammates as they filed in.

General manager Milt Newton says Garnett has created a positive tension, including for Wiggins, whose main drawback in his 2014-15 Rookie of the Year campaign was fluctuating aggression. When KG is around, Newton says, "there's this anticipation of, 'Are you going to get on me?'"

"As soon as he steps into the building," Wiggins says, "everyone feels they have to play at a higher level." For his part, Towns, from the first moment of training camp, has gleefully affixed himself to Garnett. He has delighted in sprinting the floor—full tilt—in tandem with him. Together they call out picks, swat balls into the stands and raucously celebrate breakaway jams. "Everything with Karl is high-flying, two-handed dunks and windmills," Garnett says. "He's hanging on the rim, swinging in the air, and I love it."

Garnett says he likes the kid's two-way potential, his agility as a rebounder, his passing vision, his deft touch, his big hands—and, most of all, his motor. "You can't teach the beast," Garnett says. "It's either in you or it isn't. You can't just go to the store and buy a six-pack of beast. It don't work like that."

Towns, who turned 20 on Nov. 15, says he is aware that he needs to expand his range, that he's susceptible to foul trouble—Garnett has already blistered him for biting on pump fakes and forgetting to make contact before boxing out. Garnett has also taught him how to maneuver the ball to a position that will bait the defender. He's shown him how to use the opponent's momentum to his advantage when setting a screen. "All the little things that can change me from a five-point to a 25-point scorer," Towns says.

"I'm the OG, the original gangster," Garnett explains. "Like when you go into the neighborhood and they see you and say, 'There's the OG.' It's a sign of respect, you know? The old guard. The old generation. These guys are the YG. It's their league now. I don't mind being the OG. It's what I am. I'm starting to see my purpose. Every day, it's clearer and clearer to me."

WHEN MINNESOTA'S TRAINING camp began in September, Towns was so intent on matching Garnett's output that by the third afternoon he could barely lift his arms. Prince pulled the rookie aside and advised him to stop trying to be KG. "You'll kill yourself," Prince said.

No one, Billups says, can be Kevin Garnett. Because no one is nearly that deranged.

The lunacy extends as far back as Garnett's days at Farragut Academy in Chicago, when, an ex-teammate says, players often found him talking to the backboard.

And although Towns does not, in fact, chatter with inanimate objects, he does, like Garnett, talk to himself—and his enthusiasm and his willingness to work have endeared him to his teammates and his coaches.

"I had to pull him aside and teach him how to pick the times you explode," Garnett says. "For example, when he runs back on defense, he's yelling for no reason, expending unnecessary energy. By day four he's got nothing. He's gassed."

The concept of KG advising anyone to conserve energy is, of course, hilarious to his basketball brothers, who for two decades have witnessed him springing up to swat away shots long after the whistle blows. Garnett lathers himself into such a volatile pregame state that Rivers refused to call the first play of the game for him because the shot was likely to shatter the backboard. Billups says KG is so invested at game time, sometimes he cries on the court. "They aren't tears of fear or joy," Billups explains. "They are tears of intensity."

Taylor, the Timberwolves' owner, is on his second tour with KG. He knows the pairing of Towns and KG will wax and wane. "Karl is very vocal and very sure of himself, but he's going to have tough times," Taylor says. "Everyone's tripping right now. Karl is happy and Kevin thinks a lot of him, but they are so competitive, they're bound to disagree on something."

In other words: Grizzled vets nurturing green kids is a nice storyline, but what happens when these young Timberwolves inevitably falter?

"Don't know," Garnett says. "We'll see."

ASK TOWNS WHAT he thirsts to learn most from Garnett—the man he's coined his Jedi Master—and he says it's what it takes to reach the pinnacle of the basketball world. The story Garnett prefers to share is one of bitter disappointment. It revolves around his early years in Minnesota, when he and point guard Stephon Marbury seemed poised to become the next John Stockton and Karl Malone. Instead, after just two seasons together, they wound up being the worst version of Kobe and Shaq.

At first, KG and Marbury became fast friends, inseparable, soaking in the adulation of a city hungry for success—a two-man team, both on and off the floor, dual faces of a growing franchise. The force behind their undoing was the same force that ruined the Lakers in the early 2000s. It's what the Spurs, for two decades, have guarded against. Their undoing, Garnett says, was ego.

In 1997, Garnett signed a historic $126 million contract, which helped lead to an NBA lockout and restrictions on player salaries the following season. When it became Marbury's turn for a new deal, he was limited to a $71 million payday. Marbury's camp viewed it as an injustice, one Marbury couldn't reconcile. At one point, VP of basketball operations Kevin McHale summoned Garnett, Marbury and forward Tom Gugliotta to his office to talk about sacrifice and sharing the ball and submerging egos. KG nodded emphatically, but the message, says former Wolves point guard Terry Porter, might have been lost on Marbury.

"There's nothing Kevin could have done to change it," Gugliotta says. "If you ask Steph, I'm sure he's the one kicking himself a bit. No matter what Steph did—he could score 25, 30 points—he still wasn't going to be the best player on our team. That was KG." In March of 1999, just two-plus seasons into his Wolves career, Marbury, who had just turned 22—Garnett would turn 23 that May—forced a trade to New Jersey.

Marbury would play for four NBA teams over the next decade with limited success on each,

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After more than 50,000 minutes played, KG has a lesson for Towns after every success—and every failure.

before retreating to China for the next stage of his career. (Now playing for the Beijing Ducks, he couldn't be reached for comment for this story.) For the next eight seasons, with the exception of a Western Conference finals appearance in 2004, Garnett would flounder in Minnesota.

"Kevin didn't mind at all deferring to Stephon or Googs late in the game," Porter says. "He just wanted to win, to create a great environment. It scarred him for a long time, how that all played out."

Says Garnett: "I'm very real with these guys now. I tell them straight up how it is. I tell them there is only one thing that can mess this up: egos. I tell them because I lived it. Because that's what messed us up with Steph."

GARNETT'S SELF-DESCRIBED fairy-tale ending in Minnesota was rooted in his reunion with Flip Saunders, his longtime NBA coach and trusted friend. It was Flip who coaxed him back to the Timberwolves and helped smooth over lingering tensions between Garnett and Taylor over KG's initial departure from the team. After the Wolves acquired Garnett last season, Saunders had numerous conversations with Garnett about his role as a leader and how that could be accomplished from the sideline. Then, in June, Saunders was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma and was forced to take a leave of absence. As his condition grew more dire, Garnett says he made a point of gathering his Timberwolves teammates each day before practice to pay homage to the architect of this dream.

When the team learned of Saunders' death during practice on Oct. 25, just three days before the start of the regular season, Garnett immediately beelined to the team's parking lot in downtown Minneapolis. Later that night he'd post a photo of himself sitting there, in the dark and alone, facing Saunders' nameplate. The tagline read: "Forever in my heart …"

If the void that Saunders left is palpable for Garnett, he says he fully endorses Mitchell, the team's interim coach; Garnett says he can only hope to be half the mentor to Towns that Mitchell was to him. "Sam taught me how to channel my energy and to be professional and how to always be in love with my craft," KG says. "You have to love it if it's gonna work."

Garnett won't predict how his team will fare. It is, he says, a work in progress. But so is he, in a role that could well define his post-NBA career. "I like these kids," Garnett says. "I'm going to enjoy watching them grow up."

> "THERE IS ONE THING THAT CAN MESS THIS UP: EGOS. I TELL THEM BECAUSE I LIVED IT."
> KEVIN GARNETT

IT IS A late afternoon in November, and the Timberwolves' workout has long since ended, but two solitary figures occupy the basket at the far end of the team's practice facility. They are KG and KAT, as Towns is now affectionately called. They linger most days after practice, because there is still so much to be done, so much to learn. One day the focus is on honing the prized elbow jumper; Garnett implores the rookie to take hundreds—no, thousands—of shots until it becomes second nature. The next day, it's pump fakes and misdirections that will provide Towns with a straight line to the basket. There are countless drills for footwork, including one Garnett invented that requires players to maneuver around shoes pointed at various angles to mimic the opponent's defensive position. "Attack the feet!" KG bellows, the line between mentor and coach graying by the instruction. "Attack the feet!" When Newton peeks in on these post-practice tutorials, he smiles. "School's in session," he says.

Sometimes the other players hang around, watching Towns perfect a drop-step that will emerge in the next scrimmage. "Whatever KG tells me to do," Towns says, "I'm going to do it."

Kevin Garnett's time as an NBA superstar is all but over. He says he's finally content with that. After 39 years, he might well have discovered a way to channel his knowledge and white-hot ferocity—here, in the gym, his boundless energy matched only by a 20-year-old phenom mirroring his every move.

DAVID SHERMAN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES



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ROOKIE WATCH

The Lonely Burden of Jahlil Okafor

From predraft workouts to the start of the season, we spent five months following the new face of the 76ers as he fought through an unexpected scenario—leading a losing team solo.

BY ROBERT SANCHEZ

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE BOYLE



INSIDE A HIGH school gymnasium in Santa Barbara, California, Jahlil Okafor is staring at a basketball hoop. A banner hangs along a wall with Mark 9:23 emblazoned on it: EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE FOR THOSE WHO BELIEVE. Today, Okafor wants others to believe in him.

The 19-year-old, 6-foot-11 former college standout has his hands on his head, sweat soaking his T-shirt. He lines up on the left side of the foul line and palms a basketball in one of his massive hands. He takes a couple of long strides to the basket and slams the ball through, a thunderous rattle echoing off the walls. "There we go! There we go!" one of his agent's representatives encourages from the sideline. Okafor grabs another ball and slams that one home too.

It's mid-June, and he is 12 days from the NBA draft, the raffle for which he's one of the top prizes. Two months removed from a national title at Duke, he has perhaps the most advanced game in the rookie class. Yet for all the accolades—the preternatural footwork, All-American as a freshman, the 17 points and nine boards per game—questions persist, and will continue to persist over the next five months, about the kid from Chicago. Can he prove he belongs?

At the moment, Okafor weighs 270 pounds. He is thickly built across his shoulders, chest and stomach. The first two owe to good genetics and a workout routine that has had him pushing his physical limits since he was in grade school. The last is at least partly Cap'n Crunch's fault. His size, once seen as the mark of a potentially prodigious career, now might be an albatross. Teams wonder whether the teenager is fit enough for the rigors of the NBA. They wonder whether he can play perimeter D. They wonder about his free throw shooting. The consensus No. 1 pick during the college season could slip to No. 2—or worse.

People in his inner circle—his father and friends and coaches who know him best—refuse to believe the talk. "He is hands down the No. 1 pick," says Rick Lewis, Okafor's trainer and former high school assistant coach. In the NBA, Lewis insists, Okafor could be a pounder with sweet moves around the rim, a contrast to the fast-paced, guard-heavy league everyone sees today. "It's like bringing the sexy back with Justin Timberlake,"

JESSE D. GARRABRANT/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES



Taking on opponents all by himself? Okafor might have to get used to the feeling.

Lewis says. "We're bringing the big man back."

Lewis positions Okafor along the baseline and fires a pass. Okafor puts up a shot from the right. And misses. The first of seven misses in a row. He makes just five of his next 12. Okafor steps back, pounds the ball into the court in disgust. Another pass from Lewis. Another 15-footer. "Short!" Okafor yells. It goes in. "F--- me."

OKAFOR'S SUIT IS resting inside a solid black bag with a purple zipper in his packed Manhattan hotel room. Lakers colors. *A wish?* Okafor smiles and laughs. LA has the second pick in the draft tonight, and Okafor seems in prime position. It's almost certain the Timberwolves will take Karl-Anthony Towns, the 7-foot 19-year-old from Kentucky, with the top pick. As the reasoning goes, Towns doesn't have the polish of Okafor's game yet, but he has more upside. The criticism is disappointing. Not only will Okafor not go first, it means he won't get Kevin Garnett, the surefire Hall of Famer and fellow Chicagoan, as a mentor. Still, the Lakers have Kobe Bryant and a long history of success. Plus Southern California. No. 2 doesn't seem like a consolation prize at all.

There are boxes of Cocoa Puffs, Frosted Flakes and Fruity Pebbles lining the window in his room. A bag of Skittles is on the table. Okafor is stripped down to a T-shirt and underwear. A crew from NBA Entertainment is filming, and a few friends are here. Coach Mike Krzyzewski called earlier and wished him luck. Okafor has been thinking about his mother, Dee Benton, who died when he was 9. He's been thinking about his father, how Okafor moved from Arkansas to live with his dad in Chicago. He has said he doesn't care where he's drafted, that his dream to become a pro basketball player will become a reality tonight. And that's good enough. "Really," he says, "I'm ready for this to be over."

Four hours later, Minnesota takes Towns. Then, a shock: The Lakers pick Ohio State guard D'Angelo Russell. Those around Okafor openly wonder whether he'll fall to New York at No. 4 or whether Philadelphia will trade its No. 3 pick to a team in need of a big man. Instead, it's Philly at No. 3. Okafor hugs his family, puts on a 76ers hat and shakes hands with the commissioner. He's processing on the fly. No one in his circle imagined Philadelphia as an option. He's never even been to the city, never worked out for the team and knows only the basics: The Sixers seem to be in permanent rebuilding mode, an 18-win team last season. He also knows the team has two big men—Joel Embiid and Nerlens Noel. Okafor wonders how he will fit in. *I worked toward this since I can remember,* he says in an interview after the pick. *This is the beginning of a dream.* Then: *I'm not disappointed.* By now, the online comments are flooding in. Okafor doesn't look happy. He doesn't look appreciative. He doesn't look like he wants to be a Sixer.

"IT'S LIKE BRINGING THE SEXY BACK WITH JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE. WE'RE BRINGING THE BIG MAN BACK."

RICK LEWIS, OKAFOR'S TRAINER AND HIGH SCHOOL ASSISTANT COACH

IT ALWAYS SEEMED so easy. The most dominant kid on the court. Championships at Chicago's Whitney M. Young Magnet High School, at Duke. One of the first picks in the NBA draft. "I saw him in the eighth grade," Lewis says. "He walked in

the door built like a grown man, but he had a face like a baby. He was 6-8, and I thought, *This kid is going to play in the NBA*." Okafor is guaranteed $9.4 million over the next two years. Going into the 2015-16 season, his fellow rookies already have him as the favorite to win the league's Rookie of the Year award.

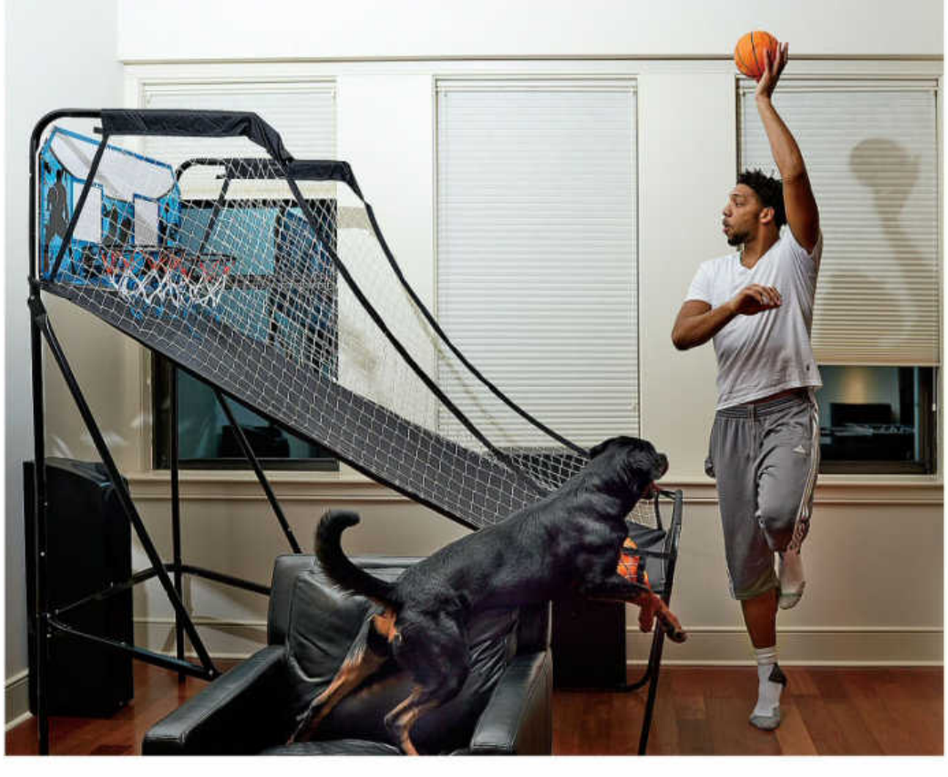
But being a pro is different. Even in the NBA's summer league, where Okafor begins his on-court journey in early July, everyone seems a little bigger, a little stronger. It's a mix of headlining draft picks and back-end roster fodder. Some guys arrive eager to show they can become NBA stars; others are fighting for a spot in the league. That dichotomy makes these games more dangerous for a player of Okafor's stature. He should dominate, but he's also a kid figuring his way as a new pro with high expectations. And he's playing against guys with nothing to lose.

The message is on display early in the Sixers' first summer game, against San Antonio in Salt Lake City. The Spurs' defenders attack him as if he's the only man on the court, and no opponent is as vicious as Stefan Nastic, an undrafted 6-foot-11 Serbian by way of Stanford. What Nastic lacks in offensive deftness and athleticism, he makes up for with pipe-wielding brutality on defense. He's a shark in the water. Each Okafor touch is followed by a double-team and pounding pressure. Nastic smashes Okafor in the shoulders, sends a sharp elbow to the back and lets a knee slam into a quadriceps.

Okafor's first professional shot—a twisting right-hander with another defender swarming him—is an air ball. For his first 14 minutes on the court, Okafor looks out of sorts, frustrated, gassed. The 24-second clock, the altitude, the stress of nonstop hustle from one end of the court to the other all are conspiring against him. At the half, he's 2-for-10 from the field. He has two blocks, but he also leads Philly with two turnovers. "C'mon, Okafor!" a kid in the stands yells as the Sixers rookie heads for the tunnel.

The final two quarters are marked with a vexing unevenness—a blend of brilliance and bedeviling lapses. Okafor pours in eight points in the third and displays Baryshnikovian footwork around the basket. But with time running down in the fourth, Okafor goes up for a shot and is blocked. He pushes inside on another possession, draws a foul and makes the basket—but misses the free throw. Later, he's blocked again. Finally, with the clock at 6.1 seconds, his team behind 73-71, Okafor gets the ball near the baseline. Before he can drive to the hoop for a potential





Kid in a candy store: Okafor is forsaking neither his cereal (top, before the NBA draft) nor his rottweiler pup, Natty.

FROM TOP: ANDREW HETHERINGTON; STEVE BOYLE

tying shot, he steps out of bounds.

Okafor's up-and-down output will be a recurring theme in these first months, though he's inarguably the best player on the court tonight: 20 points, 9 rebounds, 2 blocks. "His heart is pure," his summer league coach says after the loss. "He loves the game." After his own interview—he gives himself a C-minus—Okafor stands in a concrete hallway near the locker room, two big bags of ice wrapped around his knees. "People were already telling me I suck," he says of the fans. It was his first game of five-on-five since the title game against Wisconsin. He admits he was a little rusty. "I can either come down on myself, or I can realize this is part of the process. This is what I signed up for."

LESS THAN A week later, Okafor ambles downstairs for a late breakfast at the Four Seasons in Las Vegas, where the Sixers will play four games in six days. He orders an omelet with cheddar and American cheeses—plus jalapeños—a strawberry-mango smoothie and a stack of buttermilk pancakes. He asks for extra syrup.

Then he starts to talk. He misses Duke, his dorm, the suite he shared with Tyus Jones, his former teammate who now shares a court with Garnett. He misses his buddy Justise Winslow, the 6-foot-7 forward who was taken 10th by the Heat. They've worked out together this summer, swapping stories of their experiences. While Okafor gets a cast of mostly inexperienced roster mates, Winslow has Dwyane Wade, Chris Bosh and Amar'e Stoudemire. "I told Justise that he'll probably make the playoffs," Okafor says.

As for Okafor, he learned a day earlier that Embiid will miss the entire season because his right foot, which kept him out all last season, has not healed properly. "When I pictured myself in the NBA, I always imagined myself with an older guy taking me under his wing," Okafor says. "I don't have that." There's no bitterness in his voice; it's just a statement. "What I thought would happen didn't happen. I'm the face of the franchise right away."

It's quite an adjustment.

Two days after the draft, as part of his introduction to Philly, Okafor held up a No. 76 jersey and smiled for the cameras. Then he dropped the jersey onto a table in front of him—except from at least one camera angle, the table was out of the shot. It looked like Okafor dropped the jersey on the floor and walked away. The social media fire reignited. Okafor was selfish, people wrote. He was unappreciative. "One guy put up a picture of me and said if he sees me on the streets, he's going to smack me. My dad's upset about that." Fans, Okafor says, "are really dumb."

Then there was the woman who took to Twitter, claiming she had sex with Okafor and was going to release nude photos of him. At first, Okafor laughed it off. "How can someone tweet that out?" he says. Soon, though, TMZ picked up the story, and others followed. It was an embarrassing moment, a "bad look for me." Several uneasy hours passed before his agent corrected the record and the perpetrator was discovered.

Then there were the workouts. Almost immediately after the draft, he'd begun training at the 76ers' practice facility, just outside downtown. He brought his own trainer, who suggested they get to work at 5:30 a.m. and beat the coaches to the gym. The schedule worked for a few days, but then coach Brett Brown walked in one morning at 6:15. He saw his new center on the court and mentioned the scene in an interview. The recognition was a compliment, but it left Okafor wishing he could have kept everything secret a little longer. He wanted to work on his game in private, without the franchise's expectations—and a city's hopes—on his shoulders.

This morning in Vegas, there's a story mentioning the faux dropping-the-jersey moment as if it really happened. Okafor feels burned all over again. There's another story, though, this one from his summer game the night before against the Lakers. Although the 76ers lost, he blew up for 19 points and 11 boards and outdid D'Angelo Russell, who tallied seven turnovers and was 4-for-15 from the field. Now Russell is getting flak. A few weeks ago, Okafor might have reveled in his fellow rookie's struggles. But he has put away the sting from draft night. Today, he's protective. "We're 19," he says. "Give us some time."

LATER THIS SEPTEMBER, with training camp two weeks away, Okafor is on a court back home in Chicago, sweat dripping off the edges of his shorts. He bends over, wipes his face. Lewis passes a ball.

Okafor dribbles past chairs set up around the block, turns, shoots. The Okafor power ballet. He's in his second hour of practice, which is designed to tear him down physically and mentally, to force him to finish strong.

He edges to a corner, along the baseline, dribbles a few times, steps out to give himself a better angle to the basket and puts the ball off the glass. Miss. The ball bounces back to him. He grabs it, smashes a fist into it. "Gahhh!" he yells

HOW DO YOU LIKE HIM NOW?

The 76ers started 0–10. Okafor? Far better, averaging 19.2 ppg. He notched six 20-point games through his first 10, five more than any of those other heralded rookies.

PPG BY ROOKIES IN FIRST 10 GAMES THIS SEASON

19.2

JAHLIL OKAFOR

KARL-ANTHONY TOWNS	MIN	15.5
EMMANUEL MUDIAY	DEN	12.0
KRISTAPS PORZINGIS	NY	11.5
D'ANGELO RUSSELL	LAL	9.2
NEMANJA BJELICA	MIN	8.4

20-POINT GAMES





CHRISTOPHER SZAGOLA/CSM/AP IMAGES

and clenches his teeth. Another pass. Another step out. Another shot. This time, it's good.

A few days earlier, Okafor went to the White House to celebrate Duke's national championship. For a day, he was back with Winslow, with Jones, with Coach K and the rest of his friends. They traveled as a group; they wore matching team jumpsuits. "It was like we were going on a road trip again—just me and the guys," he says wistfully. Is he second-guessing his decision to leave school? He pauses for a moment. "I don't regret it," he says. "I miss college, though."

Off the court after practice, Lewis admits he's worried. The physical side of Okafor's development is great. He'll arrive at camp bulked up and with more definition in his midsection. And he looks more confident at the free throw line—he'll go 8-for-9 in the preseason after a 13-for-32 showing in summer league. What bothers Lewis is the mental aspect of playing for the 76ers. Besides Okafor and Noel, who averaged 9.9 points and 8.1 rebounds last season, even diehard Sixers fans might be hard-pressed to name the team's starters. Okafor, a kid who lost nine games in the past two years, might lose nearly twice that in his first month as a pro. All the practices in the world can't prepare him for that, Lewis says. "How is Jahlil going to deal with getting his ass kicked every night?" he says. "How will he deal with being a loser?"

OKAFOR AND A friend drive to a high school football game west of the city later that afternoon. His cousin is a running back for Leyden High School, and Okafor is there to watch with his aunt and a couple of cousins. A few minutes into the first quarter, he takes a seat in the front row of the visitors' section, behind the Leyden bench.

He doesn't talk about practice or his team or the season ahead. It's a moment of calm amid a sea of uncertainty. They talk about Janet Jackson versus Beyonce, an upcoming Alvin and the Chipmunks concert. He tells his aunt, Chinyere Okafor, about a fan who stopped him in downtown Philly. "He was blocking traffic," he says. "He wanted a photo or something. It was crazy."

"That's terrible," his aunt replies.

Okafor excuses himself and heads to the concession stand. "It makes me sad for him," his aunt says, watching her nephew walk the metal bleachers. "Well, not sad, but wherever he goes, people want his time. He's the attraction."

By the third quarter, Leyden is up big. The opposing quarterback rolls right. He can't find an open man, so he launches a pass high over his covered receiver. It soars over the Leyden bench, heading toward the stands. Okafor puts up his hands and catches the ball at his chest. The bleachers explode with laughter. "He got hands!" someone yells. "He got hands!"

IT'S AN HOUR from game time at Wells Fargo Center, site of the Sixers' first preseason home game. In perhaps a sign of the season to come for the 76ers, the Cavaliers are resting LeBron James, Timofey Mozgov and J.R. Smith. Kevin Love and Kyrie Irving are out with injuries. Fans line a few rows of seats near the player entrance, holding basketballs and photographs for Okafor to sign, some just yelling his name. Several are wearing the jerseys of Sixers legends: Wilt and AI.

Okafor steps onto the court to begin his pregame workout, which is more like a full-blown practice. It's just Okafor, some coaches and a couple of ball boys. Okafor gets a pass near the free throw line, pulls into a crouch, pushes his butt out. Assistant coach Sean Rooks, 6-10 and a 12-year NBA vet, steps up and puts a forearm into the rookie's back. It's time to go. For 16 minutes, it's nonstop. Posting up. Free throws. Working in space with the jumper. Free throws. High tips around the basket. Baseline shots. Free throws. Dribbling and driving. He cuts to the basket and dunks. Free throws. The coaches nod in approval.

Afterward, Okafor shuffles to the bench and plops down next to another assistant. This one has a computer open to video from the previous game, a 34-point loss to the Wizards in which Okafor tallied 12 points in 17 minutes but didn't get to the free throw line. The screen reads, "Jahlil Okafor Effort." Okafor exhales deeply. The assistant tracked 23 of Okafor's plays against the Wizards, rating Okafor's quickness to transition from offense to defense, from defense to offense; he's looking for baseline-to-baseline hustle. He wants to see how Okafor executes when he's fresh, when he's tired. The assistant runs the first play.

"You were a little slow on the start," he says. Another play: "That's a great pass. Do that every time." Another: "See your hop there? Get rid of that hop and you're good." Another: "Slow start." Another: "That first step should be a burst step. You've got a jog going, and then you kick it in."

Okafor stares at the screen. "The first four or five minutes are great," the assistant tells him. Out of the 23 plays, though, only 10 are rated "good." Okafor is at 43 percent. "We want about 15 'goods,'" the coach says, then offers: "You'll get it."

TWENTY-FIVE DAYS later, on Nov. 2, Philadelphia breaks out to a 32-18 lead against Cleveland. It's the Sixers' third regular-season game, and Okafor is showing the physical strength he has displayed throughout his brief basketball life. In the first two games, he has produced a 26-point, seven-rebound gem in Boston and a 10-point stinker in the home opener against Utah. Philadelphia lost both games.

Okafor's early successes and struggles have been met by consensus in the Sixers' front office: He's the right person for the team. In their eyes, a poor game isn't as much a physical test on the court as it is a mental challenge in the locker room. Okafor remains the same person regardless of production—thoughtful, positive, critical of his game but mindful of the slow growth that awaits him.

In the second quarter, with Philadelphia up 44-34, Okafor takes a pass deep on the left block and displays the post-up skill that has made him such a commodity. With Love defending him, Okafor quickly pivots, faces up, swings a shoulder inside, drops low and blasts toward the basket. He slams a shoulder into the three-time All-Star once, then twice—Love's hair snapping back on the vicious second hit—then slips a right-hander off the glass. On the next Philly possession, Okafor nails a 17-foot pull-up jumper.

The Cavaliers rally big in the third and take a 10-point lead. Okafor lands in foul trouble, the Cavs throw the double-team at him and he's not aggressive enough on rebounds. When he doesn't have the ball, he seems more focused on hustling back to the other side of the court; on defense, he seems more interested in boxing out his assigned player than attacking the ball. With Okafor on the bench in the fourth, LeBron James scores the 25,000th point of his career on an alley-oop slam and Cleveland extends its lead to 90-77. When Okafor comes out for good with 5:05 remaining, he has played nearly 27 minutes, scored 24 points and turned the ball over only once. Less impressive are his three rebounds and two trips to the foul line. He's the leading scorer on either team.

After the game, a 107-100 loss, Okafor finds his coach in the locker room. He needs to rebound better, he tells Brown. He wants to get there, to put in the work. "You just want to hug him right there and then, on the spot," Brown will say later. At his locker, with ice bags again on his knees, Okafor sits in a chair and checks texts on his phone. He looks relaxed, but there's no smile. This was a loss, after all. "I'm getting there," Okafor says. "I know this isn't going to happen overnight." And while his teammates get dressed, he leans back in his seat.

Game 3 is done. Seventy-nine to go.

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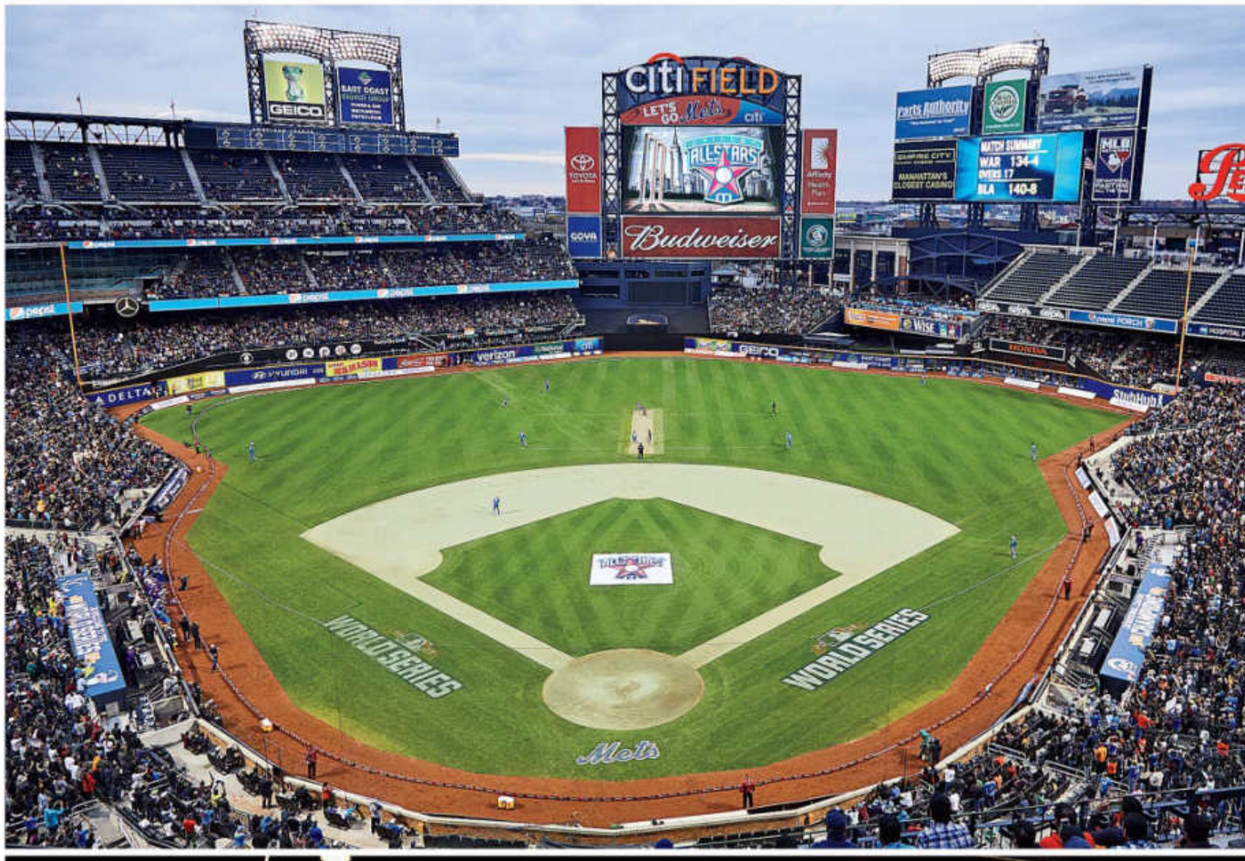
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"Cricket has never taken place in the U.S. at this scale, and the three matches in New York, Houston and Los Angeles are rare cases where 22 superstars play at the same time. To globalize the game, there has to be a lot of action; I think T20 is the best format to do that. [T20 lasts about three hours, as opposed to Test cricket, which can last up to five days.] It's fast, gripping, has a lot of energy and real close finishes. Then, even if you get 10 percent of the new viewers to become more interested in Test cricket, it's a win-win situation. Somewhere down the line maybe a kid in the U.S. will hold a baseball bat in one hand and a cricket bat in the other." —SACHIN TENDULKAR, AS TOLD TO SIDDHARTHA VAIDYANATHAN

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE BOYLE (2) AND ROB TRINGALI

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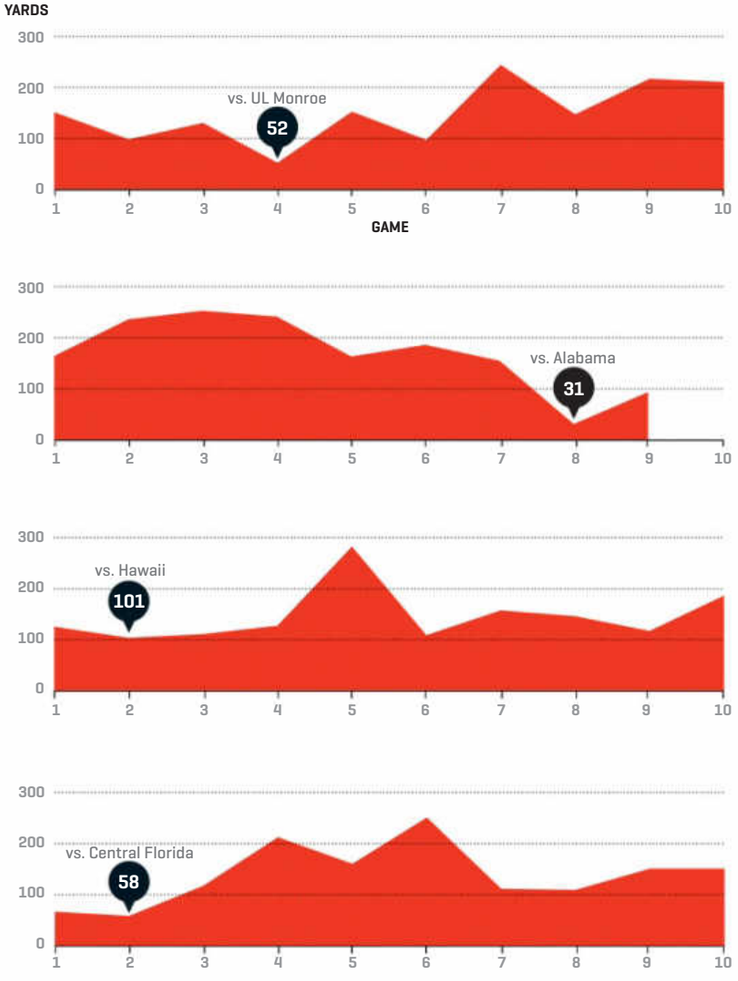
Leonard Fournette's no good, very bad game day vs. Bama reshaped the Heisman race. But how low can a running back go and still take the prize? We look back to see what's ahead for the 2015 hopefuls.

DERRICK HENRY
Alabama
HEISMAN ODDS: 5-7
YARDS PER GAME: 145.8
Henry, à la Ron Dayne in 1999, just keeps getting better. He's steady too, scoring in each game. His 52 yards vs. ULM? Came on 13 tries in a 34-0 win.

LEONARD FOURNETTE
LSU
HEISMAN ODDS: 14-5
YARDS PER GAME: 163.8
Fournette's late-season swoon (61.0 ypg in his past two outings, 132 fewer than in his first seven) has Heisman precedent. See: Mark Ingram, 2009.

EZEKIEL ELLIOTT
Ohio State
HEISMAN ODDS: 14-1
YARDS PER GAME: 142.5
Elliott has rushed for 100-plus in 15 straight, evoking another Buckeyes Heisman winner who always sniffed the century mark: Eddie George in '95.

CHRISTIAN McCAFFREY
Stanford
HEISMAN ODDS: 50-1
YARDS PER GAME: 135.4
A slow rushing start gave way to an all-purpose-yard blitz: 260.1 per game over his past eight tilts—38 more than Reggie Bush in 2005.



YARDS PER GAME, PAST FIVE HEISMAN-WINNING RUNNING BACKS

MARK INGRAM
Alabama, 2009
Average: 118.6
Low: 30, Game 12

REGGIE BUSH*
USC, 2005
Average: 138.2
Low: 51, Game 7

RON DAYNE
Wisconsin, 1999
Average: 166.7
Low: 80, Game 6

RICKY WILLIAMS
Texas, 1998
Average: 193.1
Low: 43, Game 3

EDDIE GEORGE
Ohio State, 1995
Average: 152.2
Low: 99, Game 1

Odds as of Nov. 15. Courtesy Station Casinos.
Stats through Week 11.
*Bush's Heisman was vacated in 2010.

ILLUSTRATION BY MAX HOPMANS

FROM LEFT: STEPHEN D. CANNERELLI/THE POST STANDARD/LANDOV; ERIC GAY/AP IMAGES; MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ/AP IMAGES; JAMIE SABAU/GETTY IMAGES

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On the Edge of Magical

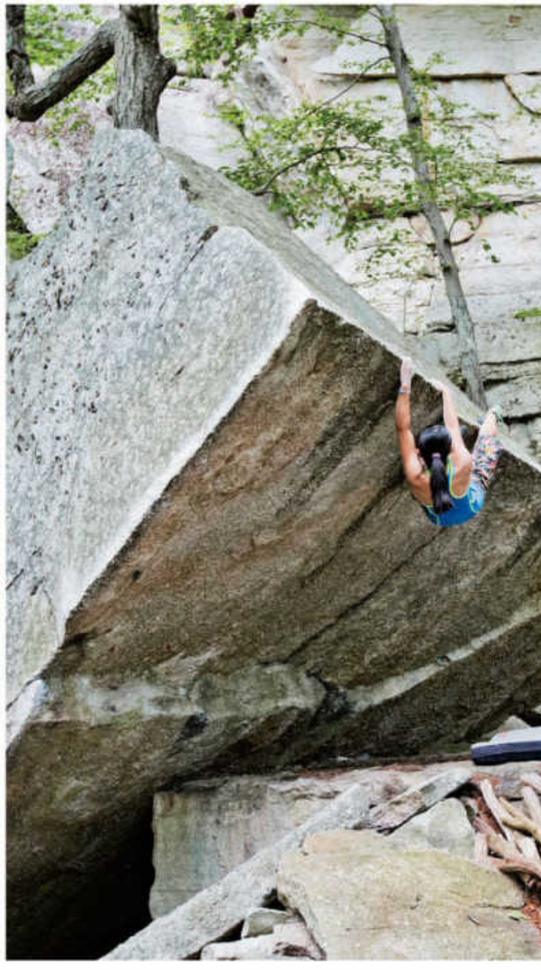
Fourteen-year-old Ashima Shiraishi is already one of the most talented climbers in the world—but can she reach the height of her father's ambition?

BY ELIZABETH WEIL

One afternoon this past spring, Ashima Shiraishi waits on the crash pads of a climbing gym in Long Island City, New York, while a sinewy guy with a power drill and paint bucket full of plastic holds finishes setting routes. Ashima is 14 and in ninth grade. Beside her stands her father, Poppo Shiraishi, who is 65 and defines himself as "Ashima's baby sitter," and who sports spiked, peroxide-blond hair.

Together Ashima and Poppo scrutinize the walls, pantomiming climbing moves with their hands, speaking to each other in Japanese. The whole spectacle is calm, gentle and vaguely conspiratorial—until Ashima ties on her climbing shoes, spiders 10 feet off the ground, sways her body left to right to gain momentum and hucks herself through the air. The launch is disorienting, like a Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel or a toddler explaining string theory—a clear breach of natural laws. And then, with just three fingers on her left hand, Ashima catches herself on a hold. "Ashima very strong mental," Poppo says in his not-quite-fluent





Ashima, who's trained nearly every day since she was 8, practices her bouldering in upstate New York while her father watches.

English. He taps his forehead. "This part very strong. Third eye."

Ashima should have been at her Waldorf school on Manhattan's Upper East Side this afternoon, preparing with her classmates for an orchestra concert. But because she could not miss the TEDxTeen gala she'd been invited to at 5:30 that evening, nor, certainly, a day of training, she is here.

After more vaulting leaps from one hold to the next, moves known as dynos, Ashima switches to a bouldering route labeled v9.* It looks like trying to climb the inner slope of a weather-pocked McDonald's arch. Next she tries a route labeled v10—same arch, newer—but keeps falling while trying to launch off a minuscule crimper about two-thirds of the way up.

On the ground, she and Poppo resume their gestural deliberations, studying the subtleties of the v10, slightly confused. At 5-foot-1, 100 pounds, Ashima is the best teenage climber in the world, male or female. Some consider her the best female climber in the world regardless of age. She won the American Bouldering Series Youth National Championship every year from 2010 to 2014. This year she also won the IFSC World Youth Championships, for athletes 13 to 19, in both lead climbing and bouldering. Many think she's on track to become the best climber in the world, full stop.

The tattooed route setter, the one with the distinctly non-metaphysical tools—ladder, bucket, drill—approaches the wall. "Do you think it needs a right foot?" he asks, deferring to the 14-year-old's expertise and his sense that if he created a v10 and Ashima couldn't do it, something would be wrong with the route, not her. Poppo watches, arms folded across his chest. The setter scurries up the ladder and bolts a new small, red hold in the problematic place. Ashima dips her hand into her chalk bag and blows the excess dust off her red-polished fingertips. Within three minutes, she has dispatched the route.

After the pesky v10, Ashima moves over to a cavelike box the size and shape of a Mini Cooper garage to practice climbing upside down. Then she knocks off a few monos (pullups with one finger on each hand) and rides the subway home with Poppo to dress for the gala. At the event, she meets me at the door in a tasteful black minidress. Together, as we push through the crowd looking for a juice—Ashima doesn't drink soda—she turns to me and says, "Did my father say anything embarrassing?"

POPPO IS ASHIMA'S coach, mentor and near constant companion. He doesn't climb and never has. Instead, he trains his daughter by applying the techniques he learned as an avant-garde dancer in a Japanese discipline called *butoh*, an ascetic art form developed after WWII. Poppo quit dancing when Ashima was born and has continued to dedicate his life to her because, he says, "Ashima possibility more big than me." Among the lessons he now brings to Ashima's climbing: An empty mind is the most useful tool in sports, and once an artist or athlete starts a

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project, he or she can never give up. “If escape, forever you can’t forget. Forever escape,” Poppo tells me. “Try, try, try—good. Escape, no forget—very bad. Forever mental go down.”

Poppo has some pretty out-there plans for his daughter. “Ashima is a girl with great talent and skill,” he says. “For example, the Beatles in 1960, they made it big, influencing people all around the world. Ashima also in that manner.” The basic ambition—delusion?—here is that Ashima will become a mass-market athletic pixie, like, say, Olympic gymnast Gabby Douglas or McKayla Maroney, she of the meme-able eye roll.

But achieving broad celebrity will be quite a trick. Unlike gymnastics, climbing is not yet an Olympic event (though it’s on a short list to be potentially included in Tokyo in 2020), so how is Ashima going to stage a breakout? More problematic: Climbing is a horrendous spectator sport. Nick Rosen, writer and producer at Sender Films, one of the few viable climbing production companies in the world, gets so bored on his own shoots that he starts playing ukulele.

Still, Poppo is optimistic. About 60 new climbing gyms will open in the United States in 2015, and they do a brisk birthday party business—great for expanding the market base. Plus, Ashima, you should see her: straight bangs framing sparkly, intelligent eyes, perfect ponytail (which Poppo secures for her with two elastics each day before she climbs). In many ways, Ashima is the ideal right-now girl sports hero: a cute, strong killer—a young female athlete who might one day beat all the men.

It’s a lot of pressure on a young kid—all the more because Ashima handles her

*Bouldering routes are rated v0-v16, by increasing order of difficulty. Roped climbs are rated 5.0-5.15. Levels may be further subdivided into a, b, c and d. The hardest climb in the world is currently 5.15c.







In Ashima's playroom (top), dozens of climbing pants hang from the ceiling. Her mother (above), heading home with Ashima after a climbing trip, sews them by hand.

own media. Her mother, Tsuya, who until recently supported the family by working at Mikimoto, a Fifth Avenue Japanese jewelry store, speaks less English than Poppo. But what Ashima herself wants is anybody's guess. My notes of our time together are filled with quotes like "Yeah" and "I guess." And even if she did talk more, she's a very loyal daughter, disciplined with reporters, allowing Poppo to call her life's plays right now.

Where Ashima opens up is, predictably, on Instagram, with her 48,700 followers. "Wooooooowwwwww!!!! Thank you @Time for having me on the list as one of the 30 Most Influential Teens of 2015!!!!" she posted on Oct. 30. And a week earlier: "Defended my title at the #BrooklynBeatdown @BrooklynBoulders. This year I was able to do all the hardest climbs they set and I got the highest score on the whole competition (beat the guys)!!!!"

WHEN ASHIMA WAS 2, Poppo starting taking her to New York City's Central Park every day, acting on his belief in the importance of nature, trailing his toddling daughter as she explored. When Ashima was 6, she discovered Rat Rock, a huge round boulder not far from the Central Park Zoo. She slid down a smooth crease in the top. Then she noticed people climbing up a steep section of it and decided to try that too. Within three months, she was climbing v9—serious prodigy territory.

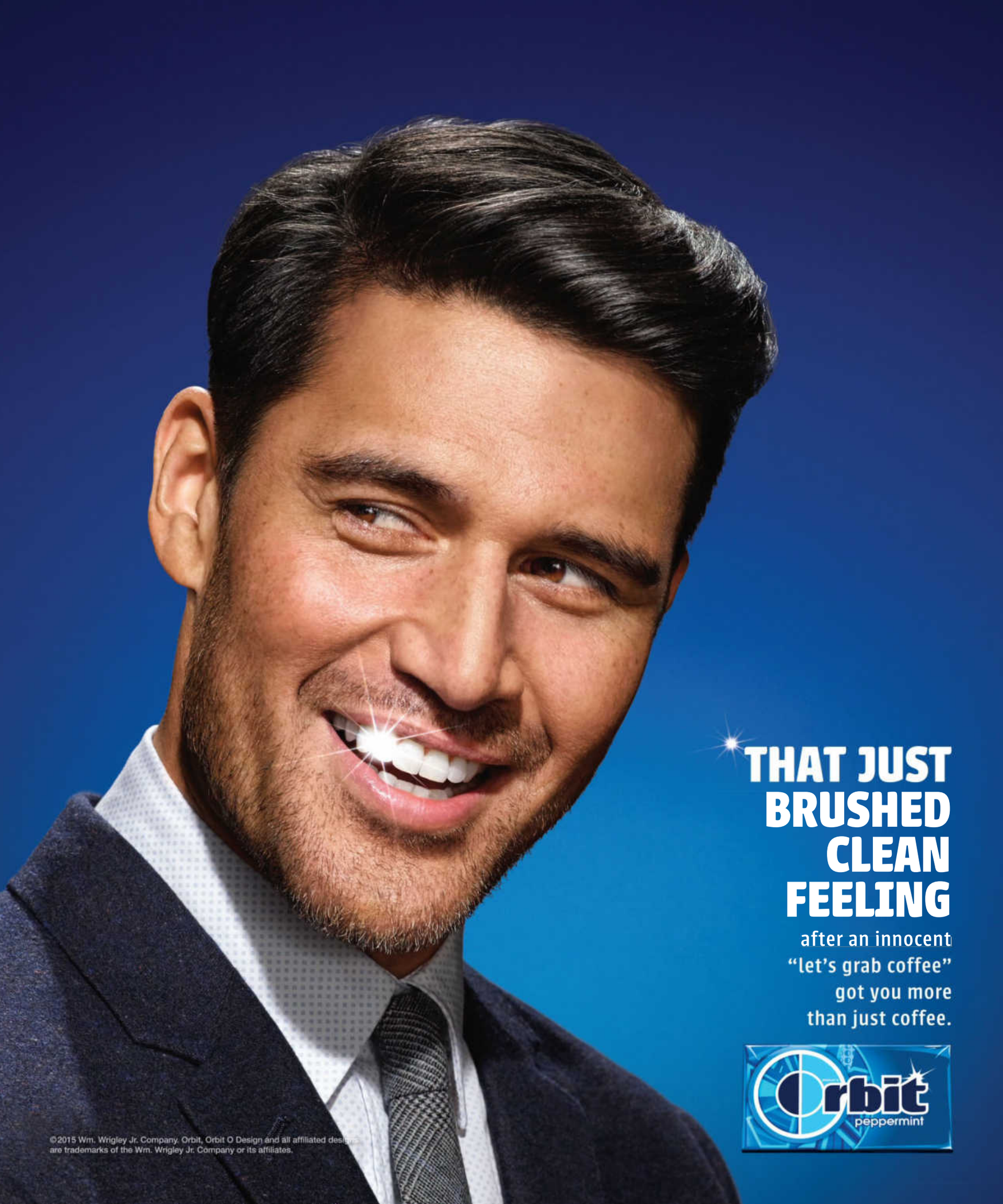
Poppo started training Ashima in the butoh ways, teaching her Zen basics like "one second, one second, just breathe" and to focus on what he called her "small universe," otherwise known as your core. By age 8, Ashima could flag-pole, or hold her body perpendicular to a rock wall. (Please pause here to consider how insane this is.) The media ate her up. In 2009, *New York Magazine* ran a profile. In 2012, the *New York Times* sports section followed. Copies of those stories still hang in her house.

Most of the time, such outsized parental effort ends in heartache, obscurity or worse. But on occasion it does create a superstar, and in that high-risk, high-reward tradition, Poppo stepped up his game. At a climbing competition when Ashima was 8, he decided climbing wasn't just a sport for his daughter; it was her fate, her life, just as butoh had been his. "Other kids ... playing park and rock climbing, same kind of face," Poppo says. "But Ashima's face is different. Face is very honest, quiet, strong."

Climbing truly is mystical to watch. You observe an elite runner and you probably think, "OK, I could never run that fast in a million years, but I do understand what that person is doing." Climbing? The closer you look, the more incomprehensible it becomes. Even if you get a climber to break down and explain the specific moves—"first you grab that crimper with your right and then you smear"—and you get that climber to translate what he just said into standard English—"hold on to that tiny edge with your right hand and use friction from your feet to push up"—once you touch the wall to try to understand what this means in physical space, the possibility of doing what that climber just described disappears.

Poppo conceded that, to be the best in the world, his daughter would need a bit of technical help in addition to his metaphysical coaching. And so the Shiraishis began riding the train from Manhattan to New Rochelle for Ashima to train with Obe Carrion, who'd been one of the best climbers in the world in the late 1990s. When Ashima first appeared at Carrion's gym, he said, "She didn't yet have her own style. She just liked really small holds because she had small hands. She liked to move statically. Everything was slow and static." So Carrion set out to get Ashima "off her feet"—to teach her to dyno, to fly.

The first principle of teaching a little girl to fly


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is: "Momentum equals strength. Speed equals strength." Ashima's performance rocketed. At age 8, she climbed a v10; at age 9, a v11/12; at age 10, a v13. Fewer than 10 women in the world have ever climbed a v13.

"ASHIMA'S BED IS the most comfortable. The food at Ashima's house is the best. Ashima is good at everything."

This is the opinion of Ashima's friends at the Rudolf Steiner School, which I attended one day in the spring. Because it's a Waldorf school, the students learn to knit socks and make dolls of themselves; they rise and say "Good morning, Mrs. Hester!" when a teacher walks in the room.

Ashima's friends, many of whom she's known since kindergarten, have seen her climb exactly once, at her birthday party in fifth grade. They adore her and remain somewhat fuzzy on how truly exceptional she is. The main excitement at school around Ashima's climbing is that actor and teen heartthrob Ansel Elgort works out at her gym sometimes.

Ashima chooses not to bring her "honest, quiet, strong face" to PE. After lunch, the eighth grade files onto a yellow school bus at 79th and Madison to ride up to the 92nd Street Y to play volleyball. In the gym, she doesn't even look like the best athlete on the court. "Nice try, Ashima," one of her teachers says after she misses a bump and shrugs. The only sign of her alternate reality is that she reflexively shakes out her hands.

Home is another planet entirely. The door to the Shiraishis' Chelsea loft opens into what appears to be a playroom for a toddler: mini-trampoline, trapeze, beach balls, cubbies, kid paintings, tiny desk, doll's bed—all surrounded by a 2-foot-high wooden fence. When she lets me in, I ask Ashima, who is an only child, if she has a young niece or nephew or cousin who comes over to play. She says, pleasant and flat as always, "No, those are mine."

On the other side of the apartment, behind a scrim, is a small kitchen where Tsuya makes rice balls, a bathroom that's painted red, two bedrooms, a kitchen table cluttered with papers, and a sewing machine. There's also a long wooden dowel on which, next to the family's coats, hang about 50 pairs of climbing capris, each in a different fabric, each Ashima's size. The pants are made by Tsuya. As I thumb through them, she bows. Then she pulls open a drawer beneath the dowel, revealing several dozen more pairs.

For years, Ashima has floated among the tectonic plates of her worlds—school, home and climbing—young enough to skip over the faults, maybe even pretend they're not there. Because Poppo decided that climbing was not just a hobby for Ashima but her life, starting when she was 8 he made her climb whether or not she wanted to. Her climbing, in turn, transcended to a level far beyond that of anyone else her age. The only other girl in her vicinity was Brooke Raboutou. Brooke's parents, both retired professional climbers, bolted climbing holds all over their house. Her mom, Robyn Erbesfield-Raboutou, turned herself into a youth climbing coach—and she remains one of the best in the world. But while Brooke's parents fit snugly into the climbing community, Poppo stayed aloof and obtuse.

Tension between Poppo and Carrion began erupting at competitions, especially when Carrion, who remains devoted to Ashima, started coaching her not just in physical technique but in how to keep her head in the right place. "Obe says, 'Big breathe. I can do, I can do, I can do,'" Poppo tells me, glasses dangling on a gold chain around his neck, shaking his head, slightly dismayed. "That kind of thing is not enough." In 2012, Carrion moved to Colorado and stopped coaching Ashima.

The inevitable drama between Ashima and Poppo started playing out in the spring. Climbing gyms are great for competitions, but climbing stars are made on real rocks, outside. So for the past five years, during Ashima's breaks from school, Poppo and Ashima have taken climbing trips. In March, the two traveled to Catalunya, Spain, where they met with Chris Sharma, 34, who for many years was the best climber in the world and is now maybe third, behind Adam Ondra, a geeky 22-year-old Czech, and Alex Megos, a marginally less geeky 22-year-old German.

Sharma is the most mediagenic personality climbing has ever had: He's Fabio-handsome, deeply tanned and prone to shirtlessness, with long, flowing hair. Sharma encouraged Ashima to work on a route in Santa Linya called Open Your Mind Direct, which is graded 5.15a—an almost mystical level of difficulty, perhaps equivalent to running a 4:00 mile—harder than any route a woman had climbed before. The first day Ashima fell off the start of the route and hurt her wrist. The next three days she spent suffering: trying and falling, trying and falling, her life on the ground becoming cruelly synecdochic. Sharma, one of the few men in the world who'd done the route, shouted technical advice; Poppo countered, sternly, in Japanese, that what Ashima really

"THE BEATLES IN 1960, THEY MADE IT BIG, INFLUENCING PEOPLE ALL AROUND THE WORLD. ASHIMA ALSO IN THAT MANNER."

ASHIMA'S FATHER, POPPO


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needed to do was maintain "a deep, quiet and strong mind and soul."

The relief on her face when she completed the climb—it's too much relief for a 13-year-old girl. "That was so, like, surreal," she said to Sharma, shaking out her head moments after reaching the ground. The two high-fived; Ashima laughed and said, "Ow." On the video—a crew, naturally, is on hand to film the historic feat because climbing, like the rest of the adventure sports world, adheres strictly to the philosophy that if you don't capture something on film, it didn't happen—you can hear Sharma prodding: "Give your dad a hug."

For the next 24 hours, Ashima fielded a zillion phone calls—*The Guardian*, *Smithsonian*, *Outside*, The Huffington Post, dozens of foreign papers. BuzzFeed interviewed Ashima over Snapchat. She lined up a segment with ABC World News Tonight. Was this Ashima's moment? As Poppo noted, "No other climber, this kind of attention. Chris Sharma been here? No."

Then Ashima flew back to New York and resumed eighth grade.

IN JUNE, ASHIMA and Poppo embark on another climbing trip, this time to Norway along with a 16-year-old climber named Kai Lightner; Kai's mother, Connie; an athlete manager from Clif Bar, one of Ashima's sponsors; and a camera crew from Sender Films. The destination: the Flatanger Cave.

Even before Ashima hikes up to the crag, a cameraman attaches a mic to her shirt. "Hey, you guys?" he asks Ashima and Kai as they stroll into a bright green field, "can you back up 100 feet? We want to get reaction to the cave." Inside the cave, a veritable Superdome of rock, Ashima and Kai look comically dwarfed. Ashima does some arm circles and flexes her wrists.

Gravity, for most of us, is a dispiriting slog. Even if we manage to get a few inches, feet, even yards on it, sooner or later Newtonian physics makes us look clunky, plodding and weighted down. Middling climbers appear this way too—however strong they might be, you can see the struggle in their movements, the fleetingness of their victories and the inevitable loss. But when practiced by masters, the sport is different—not just graceful but transcendent, a perfect joining of human capacity and the physical world. Unlike surfers and skiers, who very literally go with the flow, climbers must work against natural laws. A body moving up is a body moving into a dimension that's magical. To climb with ease is to appear otherworldly, triumphant, to levitate above our fallen world.

Day 2 in Norway feels a lot like Day 1 because the sun never set. Then Ashima picks the route she wants to work: Thor's Hammer, 5.15a. Only one person has ever climbed it: Adam Ondra, who is 5-11. The climb begins about 8 feet off the ground. Ashima can't even reach the first hold to start the climb. So after they both tie into the rope, Poppo hoists her onto his shoulders.

According to climber Alex Honnold, Ashima's talent has stayed "proportionally outrageous" since she was 6 years old. "For a 14-year-old to climb 14d on occasional breaks from school ..." Honnold's voice trails off, depressed. "She's so light and strong and she has such strong fingers. It's crazy, she can heel-hook anything," Honnold continues. "The tension she creates in her body is nuts."

Yet none of this helps with the fact that, due to heavy rains the week prior, Flatanger Cave is basically crying, seeping water from its cracks. A few moves from the start, Ashima launches herself up and to the left, but she can't stick the landing on the slick rock. Still, she keeps trying—dyno, dyno, dyno, fall, fall, fall. Each time her hands slip, Poppo catches her on belay. Sometimes she falls so hard on the rope it lifts him off the ground. Then he hoists her back up on his shoulders for her to "try, try, try" again.

Part of what Poppo looks at when he watches his daughter climb are her tells—how she dips her hands in her chalk bag, where she puts her eyes. He likens climbing on wet rock to dancing before a small audience. "Only 10 people in the audience—if I think that, already my dance is very bad. Minus. Water very bad for climbing but still mental must be, 'It's OK, I can climb.' When something big happen, *Titanic* boat going down, mental must be strong. Quiet and strong. Then you don't feel anything. No feeling, no fear."

Elsewhere on the crag, young male climbers grunt and swear in German, free-falling to the ends of their ropes. Ashima and Poppo continue their excruciating routine, Ashima drying her hands on her capris between each movement, tugging her weight against each hold to test her grip.

The next time up, she brings a chamois to try to dry her holds. When that fails, another climber suggests she try the locals' trick of shoving toilet paper in the cracks. When that fails too, one of the cameramen suggests, "You should bring a blowtorch up there!"

Poppo does not agree. "Water wet," he says, dismissively, as if damp granite was just another mental problem. His school of thought follows the 1953 Buddhist classic *Zen in the Art of Archery*, which argues that an empty, unfettered mind is the key to all movement. "Archery ... is not practiced solely for hitting the target. The dancer does not dance just to perform certain rhythmical movements of the body. The mind has first to be attuned to the Unconscious," Zen master D.T. Suzuki writes in the book's foreword. The 1974 best-selling sports manual *The Inner Game of Tennis* popularized this message. That book, in turn, laid the groundwork for the now widely accepted thesis that top athletic performance requires not just physical proficiency but being in the flow state, or "the zone."

Frustrated by falling again and again, Ashima is not in the zone. She sits on a rock and turns her face away from her father and the cameras so no one can see her cry.

MUCH TO EVERYONE'S relief, by the end of the morning of the fourth day, Ashima does maneuver herself successfully through that awful crux. But soon enough she needs to land another dyno on a different patch of wet rock. She falls again.

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To her friends at school, Ashima is not a climbing celebrity. But, unlike most 14-year-olds, she has nearly 49,000 Instagram followers.

She doesn't explicitly lose her cool. But what 14-year-old girl, roped to her father, with a camera crew, a journalist and a sponsor all watching, could possibly describe her inner state as "no feeling, no fear"?

Back on the ground, Ashima, silent, unties her climbing shoes. Poppo doesn't meet her eyes. "This part not strong," he says to me again, pointing to his head. Poppo steps out of his harness and smokes a cigarette. Ashima follows him out of the cave.

For a few hours, Poppo and Ashima remain out of sight. Earlier he had explained to me that he'd recently started working with Ashima on some next-level mental tricks—in particular, the practice of throwing screams. He scared the crap out of me by shouting "Ya!" 2 feet from my ear. "This second, no meaning," he explained afterward. "My inside very clear." Then he yelled "Ha!" without warning. The idea behind throwing screams is that one person shouts, and the other mirrors the sound back, without pausing to think. The shock and unconscious reaction acts like an emotional ice plunge. "This kind I teach Ashima. Big action, that voice. Feelings very change."

That night, Poppo shows me Ashima's journal. She'd written in perfect Japanese lettering that she wanted to complete the second ascent of Thor's Hammer. "Today bad day," Poppo says, a bit of damage control. "If climbing only easy, no meaning. Life many painful things, frustrations. From that happiness born."

The next day, Poppo stays home while the film crew collects extra footage: Ashima and Kai walking out to a lighthouse, Ashima and Kai fishing, Ashima freaking out a little when she cut her thumb on a fish hook. Like all young teenagers, Ashima is in an awkward place relative to her parents and her own identity, pretty far down the road toward self-actualization but not yet a full voting party in the decisions of her life. It's easy to criticize Poppo, to accuse him of displacing his own ambition onto his daughter, or to say climbing is nothing like butoh. But he has created a spectacular child, and he is well aware that soon he'll need to take a step back. "When Ashima 20, she can take care herself. She don't need me," he says. "My help is getting less."

Sure enough, the day after shooting b-roll, the camera crew informs Poppo and Ashima that she needs to quit Thor's Hammer and move on to a route she can actually climb. To create usable video assets, they need footage of her looking like the heroine, flying up rock walls.

Ashima obliges, for the morning at least, flowing, even leaping, up Flatanger Cave's granite faces, presumably very relieved. But then, when the cameras stop focusing on her, Ashima and Poppo return to Thor's Hammer. Poppo lifts her up, and Ashima climbs the first half with ease. She doesn't quite have time to complete the second ascent before she needs to leave Norway to fly home, but she looks spectacular, on the edge of magical: quiet, graceful, strong and in control.



MAKE A PLAN TO MAKE IT HOME.

Make a plan to make it home, every time you go out. Do whatever it takes to get home safely. Call a friend, arrange for a cab or designate a driver.

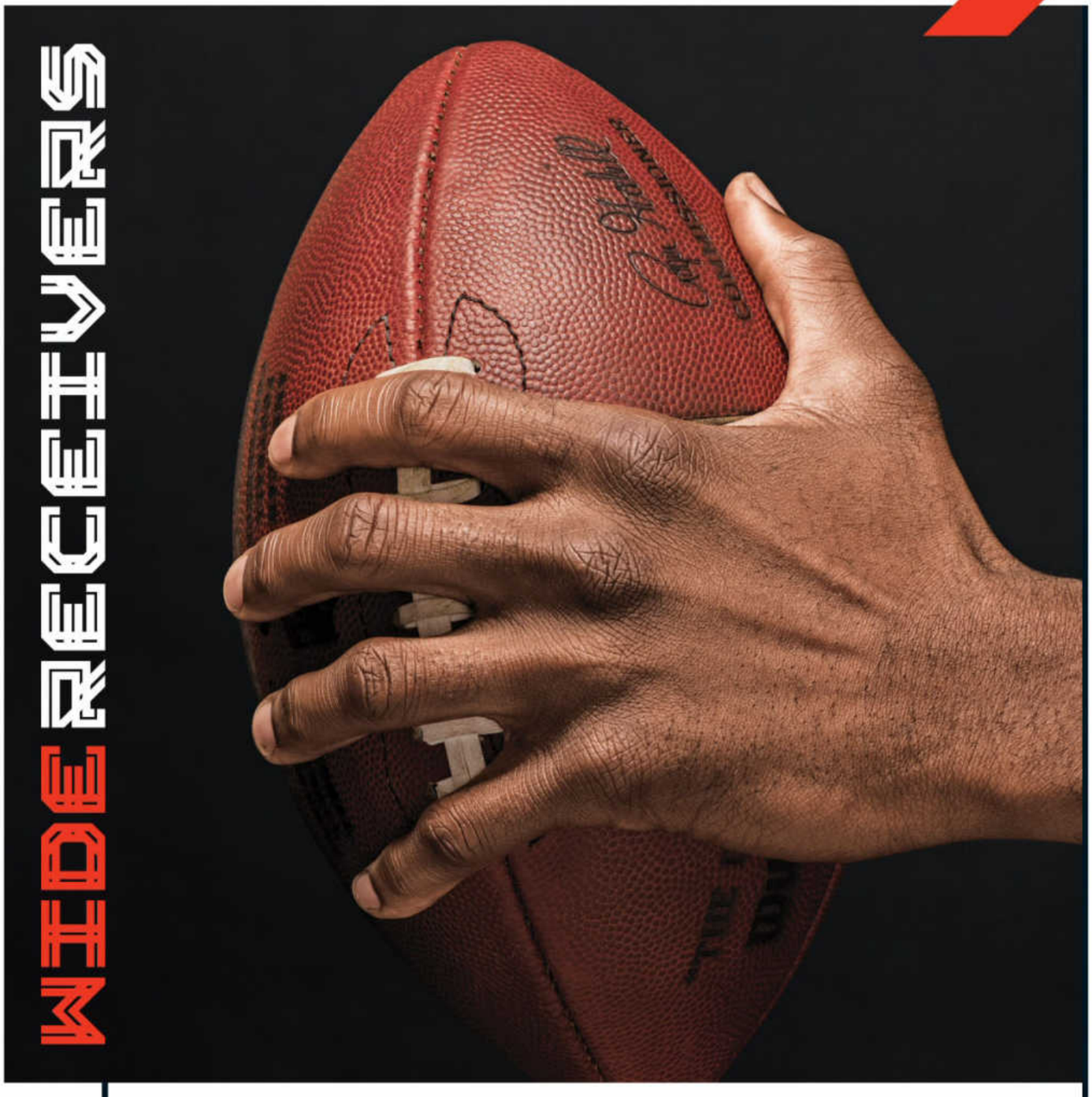


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WIDE RECEIVERS



SEE THIS MITT? On Monday night of Week 10, DeAndre Hopkins used it to snag a positively silly one-handed TD catch. Twenty years ago, Harry Kalas would have cleared his schedule to narrate an NFL Films video special about it. Today? *Yeah, it was nice,* we say, *but it wasn't Odell.* • Thus the state of receiving: With NFL teams averaging a record 263.2 receiving yards per game, the extraordinary happens weekly; the sublime is but a pass away. QBs manage the game. Receivers are The Show. Just ask Antonio Brown and T.Y. Hilton, who ran crossing routes from the same neighborhood to NFL stardom. Or ask evolutionary leap Rob Gronkowski if tomorrow's top receivers might well be tight ends. Or ask Braxton Miller, former Ohio State QB, whose best option play has been a shift to receiver. Next time he snares a one-handed TD, think he'll miss throwing the ball?

PHOTOGRAPH BY DYLAN COULTER

LOGO BY MICHAEL BRANDON MYERS



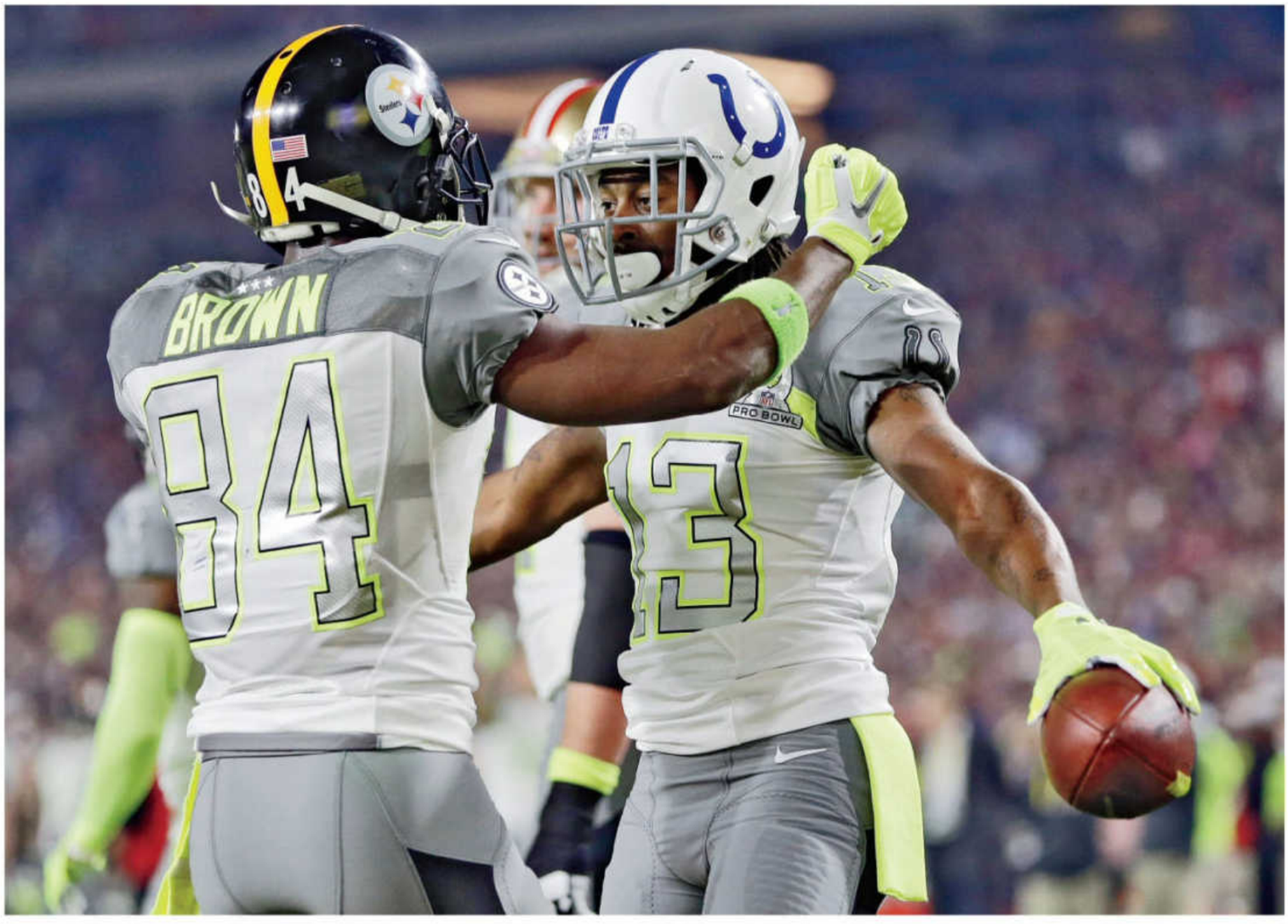
T.Y. Hilton (left), Antonio Brown



CROSSING IN THE END ZONE

Antonio Brown and T.Y. Hilton embarked on wildly different paths to the NFL from their homes in Miami's Liberty City. But after losing touch for more than a decade, the two Pro Bowl receivers have reunited, bonding as friends and as fathers.

BY MINA KIMES



Brown and Hilton celebrate a TD at last season's Pro Bowl. Brown had 129 catches on his way to Arizona, Hilton 82.

AT FIRST, IT looks like so many other drives. On Oct. 18, the Colts are down by three to the Patriots late in the second quarter and Andrew Luck is marching his offense down the field. The team lines up near the goal line, with wide receiver T.Y. Hilton—Luck's favorite target—hovering to the quarterback's right. After shaking off his defender, Hilton spins to the outside, then swerves back into traffic. Luck sidearms a dart to the slender receiver, who slides into the end zone for a touchdown.

Hilton jumps up and turns to face the crowd. Colts fans wait for his celebration—normally he'll lift his arms and form a T and a Y. But this time he does something unexpected: He starts dancing. Hilton places one hand on his stomach and raises the other to the sky, wiggles his hips, then switches hands. No one knows what is going on.

No one except for Antonio Brown. The Steelers wide receiver, who is watching the prime-time game from his sofa in Pittsburgh, jumps up and bursts out laughing. He immediately recognizes his own dance.

THREE DAYS LATER, Cora Hilton is sitting in a lawn chair in Gwen Cherry Park, just outside Miami, watching her husband, Tyrone, try to teach a group of 8-year-olds how to run a pass play. When she stands up, an older man walks over, wordlessly places a crumpled-up piece of paper in her hand and shuffles away. She unfolds it to find a newspaper clipping about the Colts-Patriots game that mentions her son, now 26. "He's been doing that for years," she says of the neighbor.

T.Y. and Antonio grew up here, playing for Tyrone at different ages. Both possessed ungodly speed, the kind that made other children flail in their wake, crashing like tiny waves. "They were shifty," Tyrone says. "It was hard to bring them down, hard to catch up with them." Though they never played on the same team—Brown was a year older and in a different weight class—the two kids were identical players: smaller, shrewder and more gifted than their peers. It was only at night, when the park closed and the boys went home, that their lives diverged.

Brown's father, also a coach, lived in a different part of the country. Tyrone hesitates to say much more. "You never know the background or the family that you're dealing with," he says.

Gwen Cherry Park is tucked near the edge of Liberty City, a lower-income neighborhood in northwest Miami that

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PAGE 50 FROM LEFT: ZACH BOLINGER/ICON SPORTSWIRE; STEVE BOYLE

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The absence of Antonio's father, Eddie (far left), and the presence of T.Y.'s, Tyrone (far right), were big factors in the players' development.

gave rise to Chad Johnson and Santana Moss; Amari Cooper, Devonta Freeman, Lavonte David and Teddy Bridgewater are also from here. Every Saturday, the park fills with dozens of boys, their families setting up tents and frying conch before football games. Grandmothers walk the fields in T-shirts with their grandsons' faces printed on them; high school coaches scout from the sidelines; grown men bet on games between children.

Cora says her son was a quiet kid—so shy, she says, that when he was a toddler and his parents got married, he was afraid to carry the ring down the aisle by himself. He was gentle-hearted, the sort of boy who loved video games and would tuck his head into his chest like a turtle if you yelled at him too loudly. Brown, on the other hand, was confident and charismatic, constantly demanding the ball, says Tyrone, laughing. "He'd say, 'Coach, I can play quarterback too! I was wide open, Coach!'"

Like most of the coaches in Gwen Cherry Park, Tyrone played football in high school. He was a star wide receiver, undersized at 5-foot-6 but nimble enough to draw interest from colleges. Tennessee offered him a scholarship, he says, but he didn't want to leave his family and his church in Liberty City, so he turned it down. Three years later, he was married with a job as a hospital orderly and had the first of four children. "Everything happens for a reason," he says.

Tyrone and Cora have lived at the same address for 25 years, in a cozy, periwinkle blue house not far from the park. The walls are plastered with so many photographs, medals and framed jerseys that the rooms have a shrinelike quality; T.Y.'s peewee gloves are arranged like sacred objects. For his childhood teammates, the house was a refuge—a place where they could sleep over before games, curling up on every possible surface. "Other kids wished they were their parents," T.Y. says.

These days, the rooms are still packed with children on Friday nights. Cora still cooks everyone breakfast, and Tyrone still drives his players to the field, or anywhere else they need to go. "It's more than football," he explains. It's community, persistence and patience—and sometimes it's loss. Three of his players have been murdered, he says. He tries his best to keep track of the kids, but sometimes they vanish, like they've been swallowed up by the tide.

That's what happened with Brown, Tyrone says. "When he left the park, he disappeared."

FOR ALL THE NFL players to emerge from Liberty City, one of the neighborhood's most promising talents—a boy so fast people called him Rabbit—never made it to the league. Eddie Brown, the dimpled star of Miami Central High, was 18 years old when his first son, Antonio, was born. A year later, he left to play wide receiver for Louisiana Tech. The baby and his mother, Adrianne, stayed behind.

After he failed to catch on with the Arizona Cardinals, Eddie joined the Albany Firebirds of the Arena Football League, scoring six touchdowns in his first game. By then, he and Adrianne had broken up. In 1996, 8-year-old Antonio and his younger brother, Desmond, went to spend a few months with their dad in Albany, where Eddie also coached high school ball. The boys loved it there; Antonio spent hours running on the Firebirds' field with his father, who would go on to score 303 touchdowns. (In 2006, he was voted the greatest player in Arena Football history.) At the end of the school year, Eddie put his sons on a plane back to Miami.

It would be years before they saw their father again.

Antonio grew up about a mile from T.Y., but he might as well have lived on a different planet. One of his earliest memories, he says, was watching a man steal a purse from his elementary school teacher, dashing away as the shocked students looked on. As Antonio grew older, several of his friends joined the John Doe Gang, which controlled the crack cocaine trade in Liberty City. "Every party I went to ended in a shootout," Brown says. Football offered escape, but only to an extent. "When I came to play, Coach Tyrone would be like, 'What's wrong?' And it wasn't like I could tell him what was going on at home," he says.

At 16, he had a falling-out with his mother's new husband and left their house. Over the next few months, he bounced among friends' sofas, sometimes sleeping in cars. If he could scrounge up the money, he'd stay in a cheap hotel room—anywhere he could get a few hours of uninterrupted sleep. "He was living a grown man's life," says Nigel Dunn, his high school coach at Miami Norland.

Brown played quarterback, and he was good, Dunn says—so good a local quarterback named Geno Smith decided not to

FROM LEFT: COURTESY EDDIE BROWN; COURTESY HILTON FAMILY

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ANTONIO BROWN
318

DEMARYIUS THOMAS
271

JULIAN EDELMAN
258

JULIO JONES
225

PIERRE GARCON
224

Stats through Week 10.

enroll at Norland. Brown was just 5-10 but so athletic that several big universities, including Michigan State and Clemson, were interested in him as a receiver. One young coach, an assistant at Bowling Green named Zach Azzanni, says he conducted his recruiting visit with Brown on the street. "I literally met him on the corner," Azzanni says. Brown stood next to his bike, he says. He had nowhere else to go.

In the end, Brown's grades were too low for the big universities. He thought he could play for Alcorn State in Mississippi, but once he arrived, he learned that he was ineligible there too. So he packed a bag and took a Greyhound for 19 hours to a postgrad prep school in North Carolina. He doesn't remember a whole lot from the trip, aside from the sight of just-released prisoners getting on and off the bus.

After one season at NC Tech, Brown landed a scholarship to Florida International University in Miami, home to a small D1 program.

Then one night in February 2007, before he officially joined the team, he was walking on campus with a friend, who got into a dispute with another student. When security arrived, another argument broke out, this time including Brown, who panicked and fled. When FIU found out, the school rescinded his scholarship.

Brown was devastated: "They said ... we're gonna say you were never here."

A YEAR LATER, Hilton, then a senior in high school, was sitting on a bed in his parents' house, staring at two hats. One said West Virginia; the other had an FIU logo on it. After saying a prayer, he gingerly placed his infant son, Quis, on the blanket. The baby scooted toward the FIU cap. "Once he crawled to it eight times, I said: 'It's meant for me to go there,'" Hilton recalls.

When he enrolled at FIU in 2008, he had no idea how close he had come to reuniting with Brown. The boys had lost touch years ago, when Brown outgrew the park. In the meantime, Hilton had thrived as a receiver at Miami Springs High, scoring 20 touchdowns as a senior. Urban Meyer wanted him at Florida, and West Virginia rolled out the red carpet. FIU, on the other hand, was a new program that had just gone 0–12 and 1–11.

In the end, it came down to Quis, for less whimsical reasons than his taste in hats. Unlike Brown, Hilton didn't want to leave Liberty City. It was his home—a place where he felt safe and loved, where his parents were helping his girlfriend of five years, Shantrell, raise their son. "His family was always there, at every single game," says Frank Ponce, FIU's receivers coach at the time.

It didn't take long for FIU to start winning—and for the young receiver, at 5-9 still one of the smallest players on the field, to become a local celebrity. The stadium filled up with fans wearing No. 4 jerseys and screaming "Goodbye, T.Y.!" as he galloped past defenses. Eventually, NFL scouts started to show up too, and they were blown away by his speed and football smarts. "He watched a lot of film, and he understood how the defense was structured—how they would cover him," Ponce says. "He had a mental gift for the game."

It was during one of those film sessions that Hilton made a surprising discovery. He was studying a matchup between Troy, one of FIU's conference rivals, and Central Michigan, another small D1 program. As the game droned on, he was startled when he heard a familiar name on CMU's roster, one he hadn't thought about in a long time. "I was like—'Is that AB?'"

NOT LONG AFTER Brown lost his spot at FIU, he received a call from an old acquaintance, Azzanni. Now an assistant at Central Michigan, Azzanni had a proposal: Fly to Mount Pleasant and walk on to the team as a receiver—a scholarship could open up. Days later, Brown showed up at CMU's football field and introduced himself to the team's head coach, Butch Jones. At the time, Brown had never actually played wide receiver, and he weighed about 160 pounds; he didn't own winter clothes.

Jones, now the coach at Tennessee, was skeptical. He sat

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No. 1
Antonio Brown

Brown in the team's first game, against Kansas. As the clock ticked, the young man kept tugging on Jones' shirt and demanding a shot, much as he did with Tyrone back in Gwen Cherry Park. Finally, Jones put him in, telling his quarterback to pitch Brown the ball on a reverse so he wouldn't have to run a route. Brown smoked the defense for a first down, only to be blasted by a linebacker afterward. He popped right up. "He comes out of the game, looks me in the eye and says, 'See! I told you!'" Jones says with a laugh.

Brown picked up the position quickly, Jones says. It was the off-the-field stuff that took longer to sink in—showing up at meetings, finishing his homework, getting to class on time. Azzanni and his wife, Julia, spent hours helping Brown adjust to college life, and eventually he became part of their family. "I would come home at night and he would be sitting at the kitchen table doing his homework," Azzanni says.

Soon, Brown was thriving, easily passing his classes and putting up 100-yard games. His profile grew; NFL teams took notice, including Pittsburgh, which would later draft him in the sixth round. He made new friends. "In Miami, you don't trust a lot of people—you can't be friendly or open up," he says. In Mount Pleasant, on the other hand, people were warm; they asked each other how they were doing, and they actually meant it. "I loved it," Brown says. Fifteen hundred miles from Liberty City, deep in the rural heart of Michigan, he felt like he was home.

That was around the time his father showed up.

T.Y. AND SHANTRELL live outside Indianapolis in a small, quiet suburb on a street lined with small, quiet houses. Inside their home, signs of their three young children are everywhere: homework splayed across the counter, toys on the floor, enough cereal boxes to feed a small army. Hilton plops onto the sofa, and his kids immediately tumble into the room. Tyrone Jr., who is 3, runs up to his father and shows him his pajamas, which are covered with cartoon dogs. "They're not gonna bite," he sings before sprinting away.

Hilton lets out a long, satisfied sigh. "It's all day," he says.

He remembers his first time visiting Indiana, flying over the cornfields on his way to meet the Colts, pondering a life in the wintry Midwest. He had torn his quad in his final college game, and he feared his draft stock would sink. But he took comfort in the success of another undersized receiver. By 2012, Brown was flourishing in the NFL. Though Hilton hadn't spoken with him in years, he'd kept an eye on his old friend ever since he spotted him at CMU. "I remember watching him and thinking, 'That could be me,'" Hilton says. "He made it easier."

The Colts took Hilton in the third round, and he quickly became a solid starter; by 2013, he was a star. Hilton's reputation as a top receiver was cemented in the playoffs that season, when he scored two touchdowns in a comeback win over the Chiefs, racking up 224 yards.

And yet, that wasn't even his most memorable game. On Nov. 23, 2014, Shantrell went into labor in the middle of the night, hours before the Colts were slated to play the Jaguars at home. Hilton's manager woke him up at the team hotel around 5 a.m., and they drove to the hospital. Later that morning, after Eugenia was born, T.Y. asked Shantrell whether she wanted him to stay in the delivery room. "She was like, 'Boy, you better go play,'" he says.

3,131

No. 6
T.Y. Hilton

Through Week 10

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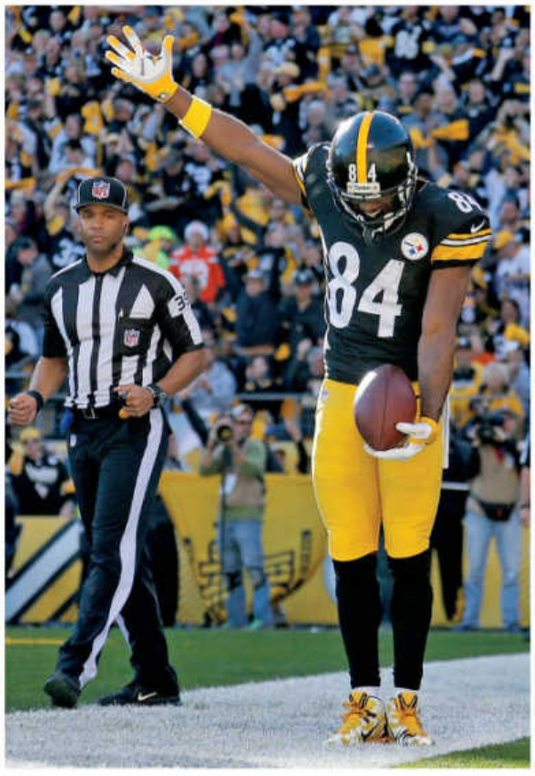


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After his Week 6 TD vs. the Patriots, Hilton mirrored Brown's famous end zone dance.

That afternoon, when Hilton scored a game-sealing touchdown, he celebrated by holding the football like a baby, gently rocking it in his arms. When a reporter asked him about the gesture afterward, he broke down into tears on camera, succumbing to the fatigue and emotion of the previous 12 hours. "I couldn't stop crying," he says. "I had just had a baby girl, which was something I always wanted, and then going out there and playing the game that I love for her"—his voice cracks a little.

Back in his home, as Hilton finishes recounting the story, his two sons tiptoe into the room. They want to practice running routes. Their father says yes, so they line up in the doorway, taking turns making leaping catches. Quis is a wide receiver, and every offseason he plays in Gwen Cherry Park. "I can't wait to retire and just go to his games—see the game through him," Hilton says.

As he raises his kids, he often thinks of his own dad, the man who taught him so much about sacrifice and grace. Growing up, he didn't know that Tyrone was a football star; he found out from his coaches at Miami Springs. "They told me: 'Your daddy was a baller. Your daddy was the man.'"

IT'S A MUGGY afternoon in late October, and Eddie Brown is standing on the Boyd Anderson High School football field in Lauderdale Lakes, Florida, watching his team run drills. After retiring from the Arena Football League in 2003, Brown coached at various high schools and community colleges in the Midwest before moving back to Miami last year. At 5-11, he's a bit taller and broader than Antonio, but the resemblance is otherwise uncanny: same crinkly eyes, same self-assured grin, same slightly bowlegged walk.

"Don't you think Antonio looks like me?" he asks. "I'm the father."

He says he first heard in 2007 that Antonio had landed at Central Michigan from a high school friend named Gerry Burnett, who happens to be Cora Hilton's brother. He looked up CMU's schedule and saw that the team was playing Purdue, just an hour's drive from his home in Indianapolis. So he hunkered in the stands and watched his son pick up more than 100 total yards, more than any other receiver on the team. "I was like, 'Damn, that's my boy,'" he says.

That October, he drove to Ball State and saw Antonio score twice. This time, he worked up the courage to approach his son after the game. Antonio, clearly stunned, "kinda said hello," according to his father—and then walked away. A few weeks later, Eddie attended another game, at Western Michigan. When Antonio's team ran to the locker room, Eddie stood next to the exit, hoping for another encounter. "He looked, did a double take and then kept going," he says.

Eddie doesn't remember when, exactly, Antonio finally agreed to talk that fall. They spoke on the phone first. He recalls awkward conversations and long silences, a tense détente that was finally punctured during a confrontation in a hotel room in Detroit, where CMU was playing in the Motor City Bowl. His son roared at him, Eddie says, screaming through tears. "'Do you know what the f--- I've been through? Did you know I've been on the streets?'"

He did. All of those years, Eddie says, he was watching from afar—keeping tabs on Antonio's football career through friends from home, sitting quietly in the bleachers at his high school games when he was back in town. He says he stayed away because of friction with his ex-wife and her new husband. (Antonio's mother, Adrianne, didn't respond to a request for an interview.) But he admits that, regardless of his reason, it was the wrong choice. "I still struggle with it today," he says.

Eddie's own father, a basketball star, had him in high school too. He also left his child to pursue his dream. Eddie grew up barely knowing him, and they never hashed out their differences before he died. "History has repeated itself," he says. When he reunited with Antonio, who himself had just become a father, Eddie asked for a second chance. "I stressed to him you have to break the cycle," he says.

DURING THE SUMMER of Hilton's rookie year in 2012, the Colts flew to Pittsburgh for a preseason game, and Hilton and

FROM LEFT: JOHN MINCHILLO/AP IMAGES; GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES

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"HE CAME TO THE PARK AND PLAYED WITHOUT WORRIES. ME? SOMETIMES I PLAYED MAD."

Antonio Brown on T.Y. Hilton

Brown met on a football field for the first time in over a decade. Brown was coming off a breakout 69-catch season and had just signed a $42.5 million extension.

It felt like they were kids again, Hilton says. "He said, 'Let me see what you got. You know I'm gonna put on a show for you.'" Since then, the two have stayed in touch, texting each other messages of encouragement. Hilton says he studies tape of Brown. "He's the only guy I have on my iPad," he says. "I watch him because of our relationship, and because if I had to compare myself to one receiver, I'd say it's him."

This past January, both players were selected for the Pro Bowl, and Brown, a captain of Cris Carter's team, made sure his side picked Hilton. "Two guys with the same aspirations, who love football and come from the same neighborhood—it was special," Hilton says. When he scored in the first quarter, Brown stood next to him in the end zone, lifting his arms to form a Y next to his friend's T. It was then, Hilton says, that he came up with the idea to pay homage to Brown this fall.

After his dance in the end zone of the Patriots game, Hilton received a text: *Man you put a smile in my heart.*

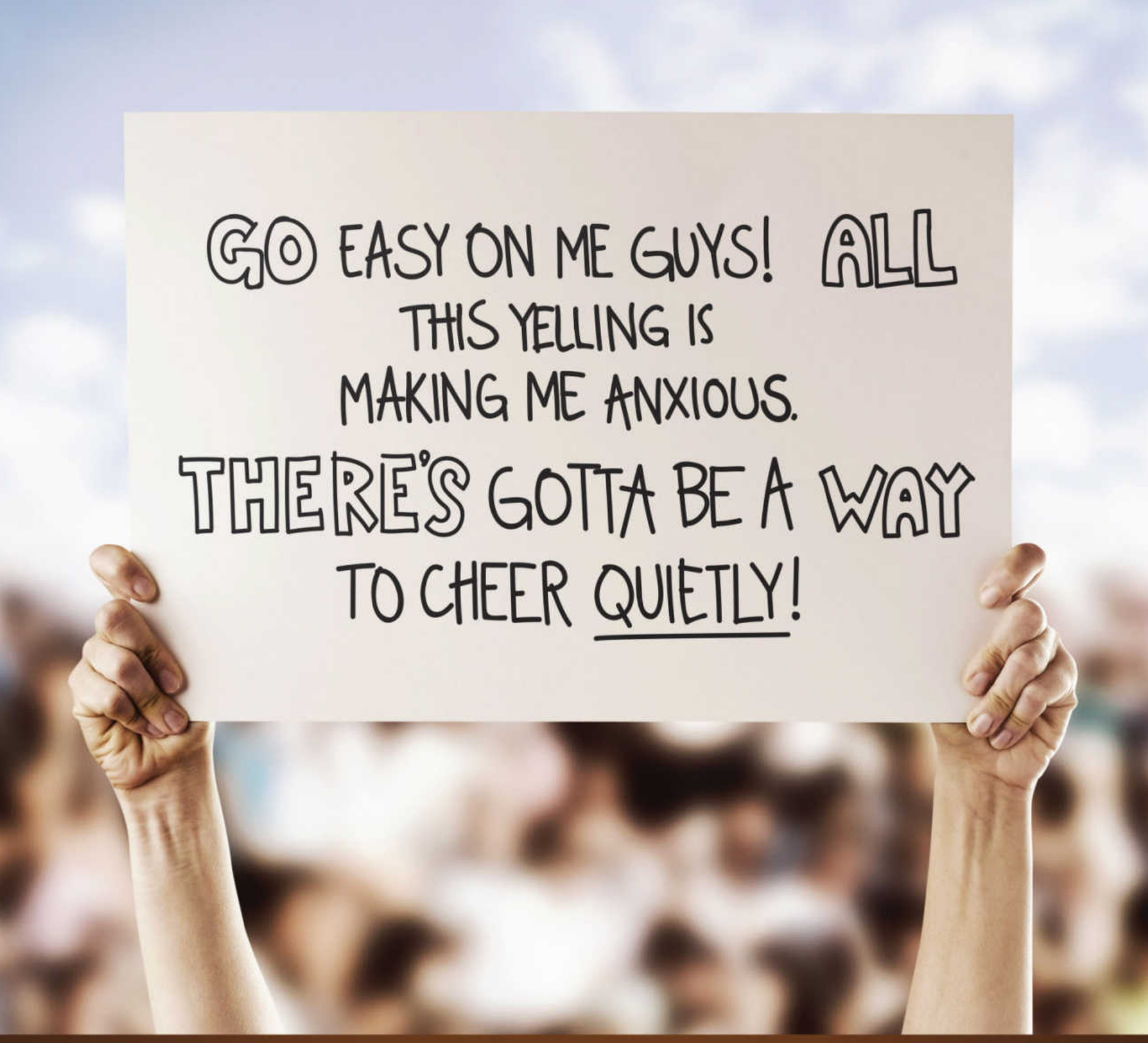
About a week later, Brown is eating dinner at a steakhouse in downtown Pittsburgh, not far from Heinz Field. Dressed in a wool and leather coat with sparkling jewelry, his hair terraced into a tiny Mayan pyramid, he's as colorful as Hilton is demure. His mother is flying in for this weekend's game; it will be her first time seeing him play in Pittsburgh. When asked whether he's excited, Brown deflects. "*She's* excited."

He says that he's on good terms with both of his parents and that he's forgiven his father. "You never know what he went through, what his side of the story was," he says. He insists that he's moved on. He uses the deliberate language of survivors, filling the blank spaces in his story with affirmations about blessings and opportunities and growth. He uses the word "positive" more than once. It's only when he talks about Gwen Cherry Park—about the differences between him and Hilton, and the vast gulf that separated them as children—that he acknowledges his pain. "He came to the park and played without worries," Brown says. "Me? I came to the park and played—but sometimes I played mad."

And yet, despite all of that, here they are: two men who grew up together, went their separate ways and somehow ended up in the same place. Two fathers. In a few weeks, Brown's eldest son is turning 8. He plays football, but Brown isn't sure how long he'll stick with the sport. His four kids, all of whom live with him, are largely oblivious to his exploits on the field. They don't know what football represents in his life.

"They don't care what I do," Brown says. "They just care that I'm their dad."

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER YANG



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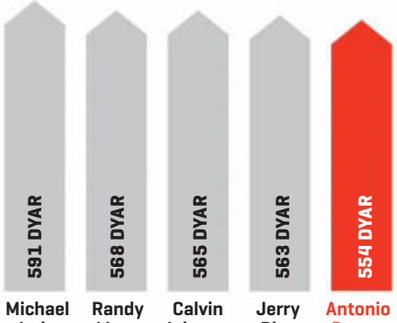
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THE BEST RECEIVER IN FOOTBALL

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Your eyes tell you **Antonio Brown** is great, but the analytics argue he's invaluable: Football Outsiders has a stat called defense-adjusted yards above replacement, which estimates how many yards a receiver is worth compared to replacement level and can compare players from different eras. It factors in the value of first downs and TDs, while accounting for opponent strength and game situations (because a 6-yard catch on third-and-5 is more valuable than a 6-yard catch on third-and-10). Brown not only led the NFL in catches (129) and yards (1,698) last season, he also added more value to his team than any other wide receiver, becoming only the fifth one (since 1989) to crack 550 DYAR in a season.

THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

Receivers are typically known for either short stuff inside (think Julian Edelman) or big plays to the outside (think Dez Bryant). But with his elusiveness, precise route-running and breakaway speed, nobody is as hard to cover all over the field as Brown. Since the start of the 2014 season, he ranks first in DYAR on short passes (traveling 15 yards or less) and on long ones (more than 15 yards). No other receiver even cracks the top 10 in both categories.

	Randall Cobb	Julio Jones	Antonio Brown
DYAR on long passes, past two seasons	189 (22nd)	413 (2nd)	510 (1st)
DYAR on short passes, past two seasons	338 (2nd)	105 (27th)	356 (1st)

THE BEST IS YET TO COME

This season Brown again leads the league in DYAR despite a series of QB injuries. In the seven games not started by Michael Vick, Brown has posted 385 DYAR, a pace that would shatter Michael Irvin's single-season record (591). Consider this: In his past 16 games that Ben Roethlisberger has played, Brown has caught 150 passes for 1,975 yards and racked up 686 DYAR—all would be single-season records. —ANDREW HEALY

150

Stats through Week 10.

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE BOYLE

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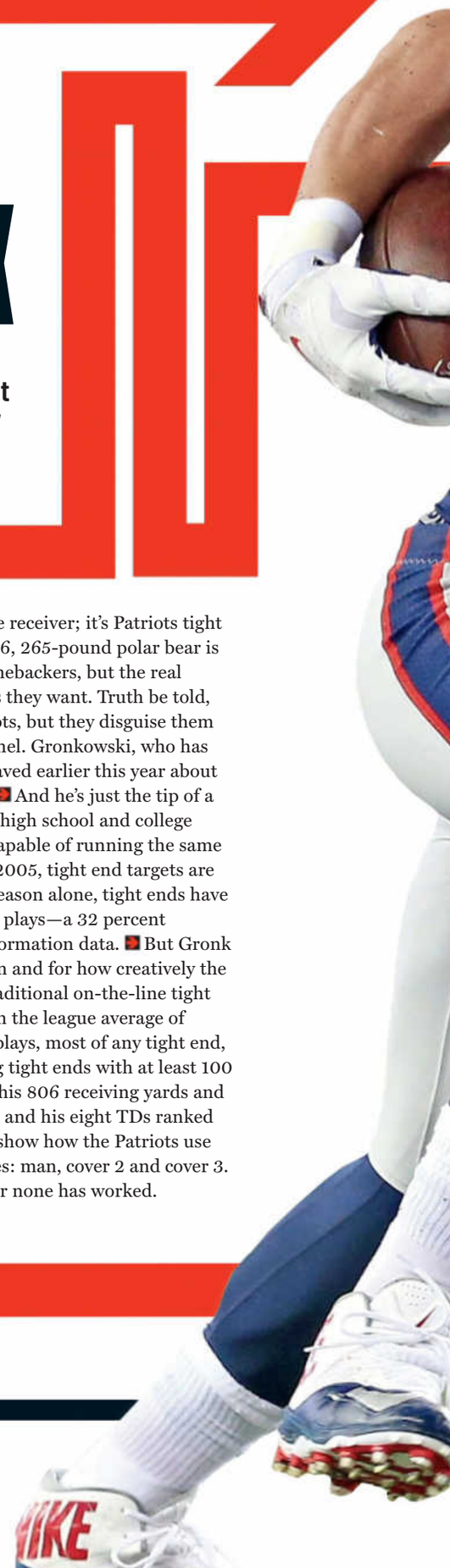
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GRONK'S GONNA GRONK

Who's got two thumbs and won't stop crushing defenses? This guy, Rob Gronkowski! But brawn aside, Gronk's brain—or at least his ability to remember a million Pats formations—is why he's leading the tight end revolution. BY MATT BOWEN



THE NFL'S MOST MENACING pass catcher isn't a wide receiver; it's Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski. Everyone knows the 6-foot-6, 265-pound polar bear is too physical for defensive backs and too fast for linebackers, but the real magic is how the Patriots get him in the matchups they want. Truth be told, Tom Brady & Co. use just a handful of play concepts, but they disguise them well by changing formations and shuffling personnel. Gronkowski, who has the capacity to line up anywhere—Bill Belichick raved earlier this year about his football IQ—is the key that makes it all work. And he's just the tip of a wider trend. With spread offenses taking over the high school and college ranks, tight ends are coming into the NFL more capable of running the same routes as those speedy guys on the outside. Since 2005, tight end targets are up 26.9 percent and receptions are up 31.7. This season alone, tight ends have lined up in the slot on more than 20 percent of all plays—a 32 percent increase from 2008, when ESPN began tracking formation data. But Gronk still stands out from the crowd—for his production and for how creatively the Patriots use him. This season he has set up as a traditional on-the-line tight end on only 45 percent of his plays, compared with the league average of 66 percent. He's been split wide on 22 percent of plays, most of any tight end, and in the slot 32 percent of the time (10th among tight ends with at least 100 snaps). Results have followed: Through Week 10, his 806 receiving yards and 49 receptions were tops in the NFL for tight ends, and his eight TDs ranked second. Here, we break down three routes that show how the Patriots use Gronk to attack three of the most common defenses: man, cover 2 and cover 3. Teams have tried other ways to stop him, but so far none has worked.



62

Number of TD catches for Gronkowski (through Week 10) since 2010—more than any other NFL player.

70

Number of games it took Gronk to reach 60 TDs, the fastest ever by a tight end. The second fastest was the Chargers' Antonio Gates, at 110 games.

PLAY 1

WEEK 1 Goal-line fade vs. Steelers
GAME SITUATION 4th quarter (9:24), 3rd-and-goal, ball on Steelers' 1
SCORE Patriots 21, Steelers 14



On the goal line, the Patriots look for one-on-one man coverage, with Gronk matched up against a linebacker.

1 When the Patriots send their jumbo personnel into the game, the Steelers counter with their goal-line package. That's standard procedure in the NFL. But just before the snap, the Patriots shift tight end Scott Chandler into the slot and Gronkowski out wide, like a receiver. This forces Steelers linebacker Terence Garvin to walk out and match Gronk in coverage.

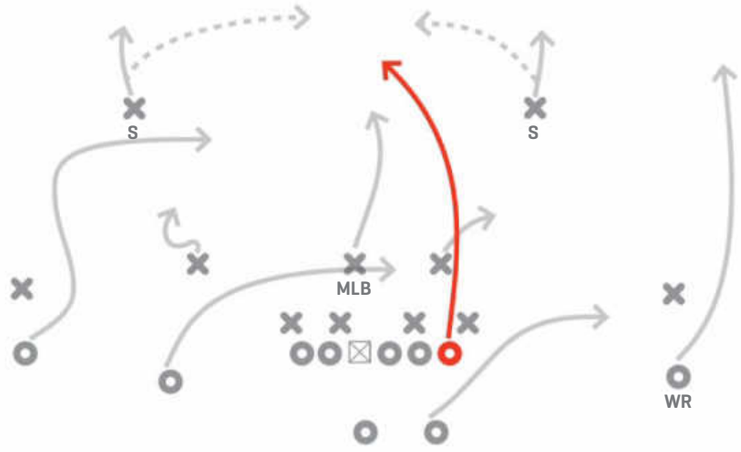
2 Earlier in the game, the Patriots ran the slant-flat combination (or rub route) from this exact alignment. But given the favorable matchup for Gronkowski vs. pretty much any linebacker, this is the perfect opportunity to throw the fade.

3 On the release, Gronkowski takes a quick inside stem. That forces Garvin to give ground and creates immediate separation for Gronkowski to work back up the field on the fade. With Garvin now stuck trailing the route, Brady can put some air under this throw and deliver a catchable ball for the tight end to finish for six.

MADDIE MEYER/GETTY IMAGES

PLAY 2

WEEK 3 Seam route vs. Jaguars
GAME SITUATION 2nd quarter (:37), 1st-and-10, ball on Jaguars' 34
SCORE Patriots 13, Jaguars 3



Cover 2, with two deep safeties in zone, doesn't do much to stop Gronk. Here, the Patriots deploy one of the top cover 2 beaters in the NFL: the inside seam.

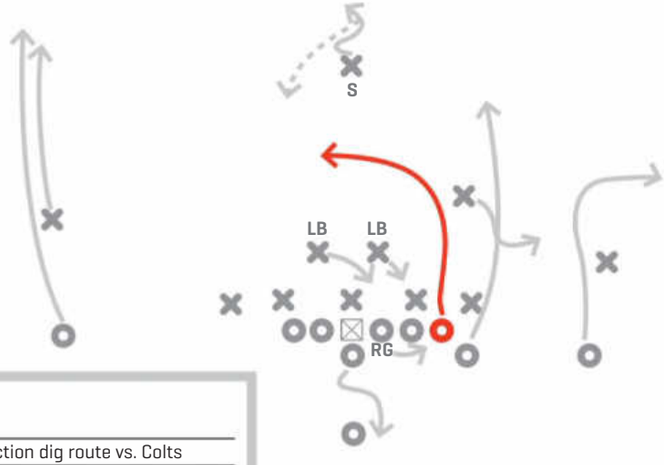
1 Knowing that coach Gus Bradley's Jags are a zone-based team, the Patriots set up Gronkowski on the line, with WR Julian Edelman split wide to his right. Edelman runs a fade to hold the safety, allowing Gronk to run his seam up the field against middle linebacker Paul Posluszny.

2 In cover 2, the middle linebacker has to run with the inside seam, with both safeties overlapping the throw or driving to the middle of the field as backstops from the deep half. This essentially creates a one-on-one for Gronkowski in the middle when he bends the route inside of the hashmarks. It's a matchup Tom Brady loves to exploit when he reads two-deep zone coverage in the secondary.

3 Gronkowski separates from Posluszny on the inside stem and continues to bend his route back to the middle of the field. This gives Brady a clear throwing window to drop the ball over the top of Posluszny before the safeties, breaking on the throw, react and drive to the tight end. The result is an easy 27-yard gain that sets up a Brady TD pass to WR Danny Amendola two plays later to close out the half.

1,327

In 2011, Gronkowski set a record for most receiving yards by a tight end. This season (through Week 10) he's on pace to beat it.



PLAY 3

WEEK 6 Play-action dig route vs. Colts
GAME SITUATION 3rd quarter (11:03), 2nd-and-5, ball on Colts' 25
SCORE Colts 21, Patriots 20

It's just as dangerous to be in cover 3—where the corners fall back into zone with a deep free safety—against the Pats. If Gronk gets free in the middle of the field, one safety is hardly a sufficient last line of defense.

1 The Patriots set the bait earlier in the drive, showing this same backfield action on power runs, with the guard pulling to the play side of the formation. Here, they pull the guard (again) to give the Colts a false run read and suck their linebackers toward the line of scrimmage.

2 With the Colts' linebackers now removed from the inside throwing lanes and Gronkowski getting another free release off the line, the Patriots tight end can stem up the field and break back inside on the dig route. This allows Brady to flip his hips off the run action, set his feet and deliver the ball.

3 After the catch, Gronkowski is now in a position to turn up the field. That's an issue for the Colts in their cover 3 scheme as free safety Dwight Lowery drops to the deep middle of the field. Lowery can't recover in time, or create the proper angle, to cut off Gronkowski in the open field, allowing the tight end to race to the end zone for the 27-yard go-ahead score.

A HOLIDAY OR THE HOLIDAY?

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ROUTE ADJUSTMENT

Braxton Miller had a rude awakening in the spring: He could no longer play QB at Ohio State. Now at a position he hadn't played since his first high school game, can he keep his national title hopes and NFL dreams alive?

BY BRETT FORREST | PHOTOGRAPHS BY DYLAN COULTER



WIDE RECEIVERS



OHIO STATE'S IDENTITY crisis descends the locker room tunnel at High Point Solutions Stadium in Piscataway, New Jersey. Dressed in OSU sweats, Braxton Miller steps into the crisp late-October evening. The Buckeyes have just taken down Big Ten bottom-feeder Rutgers 49-7. Miller carries a duffel bag over his twice-injured right shoulder, the one that used to carry the weight of expectations in Columbus. Now it can support hardly more than a change of clothes. He stands in the postgame quiet, doing what any NFL hopeful would do. He's analyzing his numbers.

Miller had only three opportunities, two catches for 55 yards and one rush for 16. Yet he makes sure to remain upbeat. "I love it," he says. "Coach Meyer knows I love it too."

No, Miller doesn't love that he has been repositioned from quarterback to wide receiver, reduced from BMOC to bit player. But after missing all of Ohio State's 2014 national championship season, being back on the field is reward enough. It was Miller, a two-time Big Ten Offensive Player of the Year under center, who set this bizarre Ohio State story in motion. His shoulder injury in August 2014 allowed two backups—first J.T. Barrett, then Cardale Jones—to lead OSU to that startling title. And it is Miller whose on-the-job transition this fall has provided a tidy metaphor for the team's efforts to find itself all over again.

Ohio State averaged 44.8 points per game last season, tops in the Big Ten and No. 5 in the country. The Buckeyes appeared to have little room for Miller; more to the point, they looked as if they didn't need him. Then the offseason arrived, and with it the sort of juicy speculation that can tear a team apart, especially one with three elite QBs. Who would start? Who would transfer? How could Urban Meyer keep everyone happy?

Such high-class problems are at the root of this season's fits and starts. In September, Ohio State scored only 20 points and gave up 13 against a MAC school, Northern Illinois. The Buckeyes' seven-point win at Indiana to begin October had the trappings of a loss. The next Saturday, they were still tied early in the second half against Maryland, which has performed this year as though it belongs in the MAC.

Over the second half of the season, Ohio State has hit its stride, while whatever gains Miller has earned have been met with a step back. A week after Rutgers, he beat a Minnesota corner on a



A QB no more, Miller opened the 2015 highlight reel with a spin move. But the nuances of his new position haven't come easily.

deep post, smoothly making the catch before getting thrown to the ground, his head slamming the turf. He would exit that game and get only two touches the next week, losing 4 yards, at Illinois.

In late November, these questions remain: Has Ohio State, ranked No. 3 by the College Football Playoff committee entering Week 12, progressed enough to repeat as national champ? And has Miller shown the specialized skills at receiver to have a career beyond January?

MILLER'S TROUBLES BEGAN innocently enough, at the Orange Bowl against Clemson on Jan. 3, 2014. Tackled on the fifth play of the game, he landed on his right elbow. Pain shot through his shoulder, but he shrugged it off, throwing for 234 yards in a 40-35 loss. The next month, Miller had surgery to repair a torn labrum, the ring of cartilage where the shoulder socket attaches to the shoulder ligaments.

Miller sat out spring practice, expecting to return to fall camp 100 percent, prepared to push Jameis Winston and Marcus Mariota for the 2014 Heisman Trophy. But on Aug. 18, while cautiously testing his shoulder in preseason drills, he tossed a simple, short pass to a cutting receiver, no more than a flick of the wrist. "It popped out," Miller says of his shoulder. He had reinjured the labrum. "I have never felt pain like that in my life, and I never want to go through it again."

THREE AND IN
Miller's 24.3 yards per catch on third down through Week 11 topped the Big Ten.



321
Receiving yards through Week 11

WEEKS 6-11
208
Receiving yards on 14 catches

WEEKS 1-5
113
Receiving yards on eight catches

Drew Brees, the Saints quarterback who had his own labrum repaired, phoned to offer support. "He was just explaining to me what happened, how he overcame it, how he fought through it," Miller says. "His was worse than mine. He's still playing quarterback." As encouraging as that conversation might have been, it couldn't mask the reality of Miller's position after a second surgery performed by James Andrews, the 73-year-old orthopedist to the all-stars. With his right arm in a sling, Miller had never felt further from his team.

"[There was] a lot of alone time," Miller says. "Two shoulder surgeries aren't the easiest thing. The hardest part was, I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know if my shoulder was going to come back healthy or if I was going to have to sit out again this year. I stopped a lot of things. You know, stopped going out, partying. I just focused on what I really wanted to accomplish, and my shoulder." (Teammates have taken to calling him Uncle Braxton.)

He set a goal: After six months of rehab, he wanted to throw the ball 55 yards with relative ease, "the breaking point on some guys' top-end deep balls," he says. Miller made several visits to Andrews' office in Alabama, where he underwent rounds of strength testing, monitoring the progress of his recovery.

"I knew after the last checkup that I wasn't ready for quarterback," he says. "I couldn't throw over 40 yards. I was throwing hard, about 70 mph, 20 yards. But I couldn't throw over 40 yards. There's no point in playing quarterback if you can't throw over 40 yards. It was devastating."

Having graduated from Ohio State last December, Miller was eligible to transfer and play immediately. Florida State, LSU and Alabama were reportedly among the schools that expressed interest, along with Oregon, Mississippi and Duke. "[Transferring] wasn't *real* real," says Kevin Miller, Braxton's father. "He didn't know how his shoulder was going to develop. And it would be useless to transfer and then you can't play the position that you transferred for. Then you're trying to switch to another position, and you're coming to another program. That's going to be super hard. And his loyalty has always lied with Ohio State. We needed a backup plan. We knew that he was athletic enough. We knew he could catch, and we knew what he could do with the ball in his hands."

By June, father and son agreed that remaining in Columbus wasn't just the best option, it was the only one. And playing receiver—even if Jones or Barrett were to get banged up, become ineffective or enter Meyer's doghouse—was his only choice. "Unless I was going to go play basketball," Braxton says. The last time he had played basketball competitively was at Wayne High School in Huber Heights, Ohio, which is also where he last lined up at wideout. Miller played the first half of his first game at the position. He was under center to start the second half, never looking back except for a few plays at receiver, for laughs, in the 2011 Under Armour All-America Game.

But to keep his NFL hopes alive, the 6-foot-2, 215-pound Miller would now have to learn how to be a wide receiver in earnest. He took his first steps during clandestine evening workouts this spring with Barrett and Jones, wideout Michael Thomas and safety Vonn Bell. Miller is a superior athlete with elite speed and hand-eye coordination, yet he would soon confront a significant break, both philosophical and physical, between his old and new positions.

"As a quarterback or running back,



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you work on a horizontal plane," says Ohio State receivers coach Zach Smith. "As a receiver, you have to take that athletic ability and transfer it onto a vertical plane. On a post route, most athletes, when running full speed, will slow down and their steps will get choppy as they change direction onto an angle of departure. A receiver who is well-versed will be fluid and smooth. They'll put their foot in the ground with body language and accelerate out, and their stride won't shorten. You can be shifty after the catch. But you don't want to be shifty in a route."

Miller was making a switch that has become increasingly common for players between high school and college. Over the past couple of decades, as the spread and read-option offenses have come to dominate the prep game, coaches increasingly have put their most talented athlete at QB, a kid who can make things happen with his legs as much as his arm. But the makeover becomes that much more difficult when it happens later, between college and the NFL combine, for spread QBs who lack the size, dropback ability and arm strength to succeed on Sundays.

The current model for this transition is Julian Edelman, a 5-10, 200-pound quarterback in college who has become one of Tom Brady's go-to targets (see page 81). "Julian's a smart guy," says New Mexico State coach Doug Martin, who coached Edelman at Kent State. "Pro scouts don't like to project people into something they haven't ever seen them do before. We tried to help him his senior year by putting him back to return punts. There are not many quarterbacks who are also your punt returner. But we did that so scouts could see that he could do those types of things."

For Miller, a season-long head start on others likely destined to switch (TCU QB Trevone Boykin, for one) could be a blessing. "They don't do a lot of coaching [in the NFL]," Smith says. "You can't ask a kid to try to learn receiver when he's already there. That's something he's got to develop and be tutored in before he's there."

Even though doubt crept in as Miller practiced routes and blocking, he ultimately accepted that his fate in 2015 and beyond lay in the hands of two guys who used to back him up.

"I went through a lot of hard times," he says. "A lot of depressing moments for me and my family. I just, you know, crossed [QB] out, and I focused on receiver."

THE BUCKEYES' NEWEST target executed a grand entrance to preseason practice. Miller arrived at the team hotel in a Camaro—white with black racing stripes—driven by Regis Williams, a fellow Ohio State student and friend from high school. Following the Camaro was a drone, filming from overhead. Williams was compiling video for a Miller comeback film titled *The Return of the Real*. (The documentary, like its subject, remains a work in progress.)

Ohio State quickly enacted a no-fly zone over the practice field. But as fall camp ramped up, with Miller, Barrett and Jones healthy and the Buckeyes preparing to defend a national title, the team facility did take on the feel of a movie set. And the trio received the star treatment around town. "Man, shoo, it's crazy," Miller says of the stir that he, Barrett and Jones can create, recounting an August trip to the Polaris Fashion Place mall. "We bring Hollywood to Columbus. The three-headed monster." Making their way through the mall, they came upon a sports apparel store. In the window display was Miller's old No. 5 jersey—being sold on clearance.

"I don't want to see No. 5 no more," says Miller, who traded the number to redshirt freshman receiver Johnnie Dixon for No. 1. "If I see it in the stores hanging up, I get that funny feeling in my stomach. The type of tragic situations I went through—it would just give me flashbacks of what happened." In No. 1, he finds deeper meaning: "I only got one shot to do it."

On Labor Day in Blacksburg, Virginia, in his first game at wide receiver, Miller showed a national television audience just how seriously he was taking his last season. Against Virginia Tech, the only team to beat the Buckeyes last year, Miller touched the ball eight times—five rushes, three catches—and scored two long touchdowns. On a 53-yard score in the third quarter, he executed a balletic spin move that pierced the Hokies' defense and kicked off the college football highlight season. "It just popped into my blood when I got the ball in my hands," Miller says. After one game, with a single, instinctively artistic maneuver, he was apparently back.

However, lost amid the praise was the fact that Miller had executed the play on a run after a direct snap, not a catch over the middle, and had juked a down lineman, not a defensive back. It was Miller the athlete, not Miller the receiver. And as Ohio State's schedule played out, his snaps decreased. Meyer understood what Miller could do with the ball, but he wasn't confident in Miller's capacity as a fully formed wide receiver. "He didn't know what to do," Meyer says flatly.

While innately talented to dazzle with ball in hand, Miller had yet to grasp the thankless, yet fundamental, aspects of his new position. "He wasn't completely ready to be thrown in a game where we ask him to stalk-block a linebacker," Smith says. "That's something he didn't really understand. Coach Meyer was a little apprehensive."

In OSU's third game, the one against Northern Illinois, Miller had four carries and no receptions. Against Western Michigan the next week, he tallied 38 total yards. Then, against Indiana, he had one rush, one catch, 5 yards in all. He had become a forgotten piece in a struggling offense. Jones was starting and Barrett was entering the game in the red zone, but both performed inconsistently enough to beg the questions: Could Miller—even with a 40-yard shoulder—be more valuable at his former position? Was he even cut out to be a receiver?

For every Edelman, there is a Terrelle Pryor, another Ohio State star QB who attempted to transition to wideout with the Browns over the summer, only to be cut before the season. In fact, there are only a few players in the NFL today who have made the switch successfully, and most started the move well before draft season: The Packers' Randall Cobb began his career as Kentucky's QB but moved to receiver full time at the end of his freshman year; Cameron Meredith, a rookie wideout with the Bears, played two seasons of backup QB at Illinois State; and Cecil Shorts III, a wideout for the Texans, was a part-time QB as a freshman at D3 Mount Union before switching. B.J. Daniels did spend his entire career under center at South Florida, but in his third NFL season, the wideout remains relegated to the Seahawks' practice squad.

"You don't realize how much goes into what the receiver does," Cobb says. "It takes time. Being able to get in a comfortable stance that allows you to get off of press coverage. Just the little technique and speed cuts. Bursting and turning. Being able to use your leverage. There was so much to go into it that you had to work on it on a daily basis. Especially when you go from playing quarterback, where you're worrying about dropping back and your footwork."

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"I DON'T WANT TO SEE NO. 5 NO MORE. IT WOULD JUST GIVE ME FLASHBACKS."

Through the season's first five games, Meyer treated Miller mostly as a package player, inserting him in passing or short-yardage situations, when he wouldn't be required to handle complicated blocking assignments. Not counting his breakout against the Hokies, Miller had just five catches for 34 yards in that span.

"It is difficult for a guy, especially a guy trying to grow into a position, to not get a lot of opportunities," says ESPN analyst Joey Galloway, an All-Big Ten receiver at Ohio State and a 16-year NFL veteran. "I always found it tough to not be in the flow of the game and then be expected to make a play. If you're playing 30, 35 plays a game, you're spending more than half the game on the sidelines. It is tough to become a playmaker."

THERE IS A moment in Ohio State's game against Rutgers that epitomizes Braxton Miller's frustrations, this mental limbo between the quarterback he used to be and the receiver he's been forced to become. In the first quarter, he streaks free of coverage and races down the middle of the field. He is all alone for a sure, easy touchdown. The Rutgers defense fails to see him. So does Barrett, who is playing his first game this season as the Buckeyes' official starter. Miller jogs back to the huddle, uncertain whether another opportunity will arise.

Later, with 3:45 left in the first half, Miller does get his shot. Facing single coverage, 45 yards down the right sideline, he has beaten his man. But Barrett's pass is underthrown. Miller spins around to locate it. The ball darts through his hands, bouncing off his lap. It smacks the defender's leg, then careens into Miller's face mask, all of this transpiring in an instant. As he falls to the turf, Miller instinctively reaches up and grabs the ball, rolling over to secure it. Pure athlete or budding wide receiver?

In the halftime chow line in the Rutgers press box, two men in OSU gear engage in this exchange:

Buckeye 1: (shaking his head) You see that one? Again.

Buckeye 2: (admonishing tone) That's not the way you look at it. He made a great catch.

Buckeye 1: And that one last week, the touchdown he almost dropped.

Buckeye 2: You don't look at it that way. Braxton makes the amazing catch.

Such is the burden of making the switch on the biggest of stages, as part of the defending national champs. It's not enough to make a circus catch—the circus catch must appear routine. More than that, the catch is only one part of the job.

"You watch his film now, he's one of my better blockers," Smith says. "Which is crazy to think about, but he really is. He's become a complete receiver. He has developed from a package guy to a guy we can have in the game at any time. There's no concern about what the playcall is because we know he'll execute as good as anybody."

IT'S OCT. 30, the Friday of the Buckeyes' bye week, and Braxton Miller is having his picture taken. A photographer is set up in a far corner of Ohio State's indoor field house along with his three-man crew.

Before the shoot began, the photographer had asked OSU's PR man, Jerry Emig, whether Miller might throw a few passes for the camera. Emig immediately nixed the proposal. "Braxton hurt his shoulder on a simple little throw," Emig says. "I was there. They brought the cart out, and I thought, 'Who is that for?' And then, 'Oh, no.' So, no, Braxton's not throwing any passes. I'm not gonna get fired over a photo shoot."

Miller rarely showed enthusiasm for being the public face of the Buckeyes, but now that he is no longer their leading man, he's warming to the reheated attention. Against a white backdrop, he's in full pads, dressed in his No. 1 jersey. His Camaro-driving friend, Regis Williams, is deejaying hip-hop through a portable speaker. With the photographer's strobe light popping off, this is starting to feel like a party.

Miller is enrolled in the minimum course load—two online classes—to stay eligible for football. As the scheduled one-hour shoot stretches into two, he says, "Man, I got nothing else to do today."

When Emig is called into another meeting, the crew takes a break to address a technical concern and Miller steps away from the set. He walks onto the practice field. As he reaches the hashmarks, he says, "Reminds me of the old days."

Miller crouches. He's getting into position under an imaginary center. "Y'all want me back at quarterback," he says. He slaps his hands together, asking for the ball. "Going back to my days, baby." Miller makes a sound like he's sitting down to a hot meal: "Mmm-mmm."

Quickly, he jerks his hands toward his chest, where he cups an imaginary football. He backpedals through a four-step drop. Abruptly, he hits the brakes, keeps position, bouncing on the balls of his feet. His right arm is cocked. He looks into the distance, scanning for a target. There's that old feeling, when he was in control, knew where everything was headed. And then the smile drops off his face. His lips part. Out there, where the invisible receivers are crossing and breaking, Braxton Miller sees a familiar figure.





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JULIAN EDELMAN ON THE SHIFT FROM NCAA QB TO NFL RECEIVER

Since he was drafted by the Patriots in 2009, Julian Edelman has gone from record-setting Kent State QB to the No. 1 wide receiver on an undefeated team (though he's on the bench with a broken foot until the playoffs). It wasn't easy, but plenty of football experience—and one crazy-looking pinkie (see page 86)—helped shape Tom Brady's primary ball catcher.

After the Pats called my name, I was just looking to make the team any way I could. At the beginning, it was special teams, trying to make myself as versatile as possible. I had no clue where they'd use me—I was a transfer position guy who was kind of a long shot, so I just wanted to do whatever I could to stick.

The transition to receiver was really tough. I'd never played the position, never run routes. I'm a rookie in the NFL, in a different part of the country, learning a new position. I'm given this huge book, and I basically have to learn a new language. And if I don't, I'm gone.

Now being a former QB helps me be on the same page as the quarterback, knowing what he's looking for, the spots and zones and how to pick up what type of coverages I'm going against. I can get way better at it, let's just say that, but my past has definitely helped.

—AS TOLD TO MORTY AIN

Like Edelman, Braxton Miller will be drafted for much more than his QBR.

	Edelman Kent St.	**Miller** Ohio St.
Height	5-10	6-2
Weight	200	215
40-yd dash	4.62	sub-4.4*
QBR	45.8	76.2
Pass yards	4,997	5,295
TD/INT	30/31	52/17

Both QBs' rushing stats speak to their athleticism and versatility.

Edelman, Kent State

2,461

RUSH YARDS 22 TDs, 4.9 yards/rush

Miller, Ohio State

3,272

RUSH YARDS 33 TDs, 5.5 yards/rush

*Mel Kiper's prediction

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER HAPAK

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PREFE PASSIN

Times—and offensive schemes receivers are catching 25 percent than in 2009. So where exactly

BY LUKE

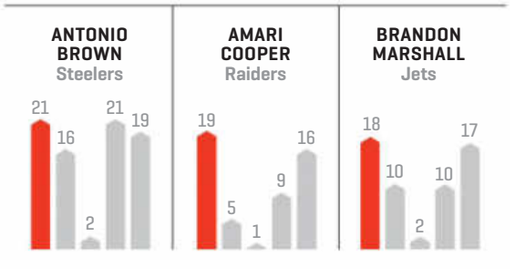
OUTSIDE LEFT NUMBERS

23.3%

Receivers are catching nearly one of four balls on the far left side of the field this season. DeAndre Hopkins' 26 receptions there led the league through Week 10.



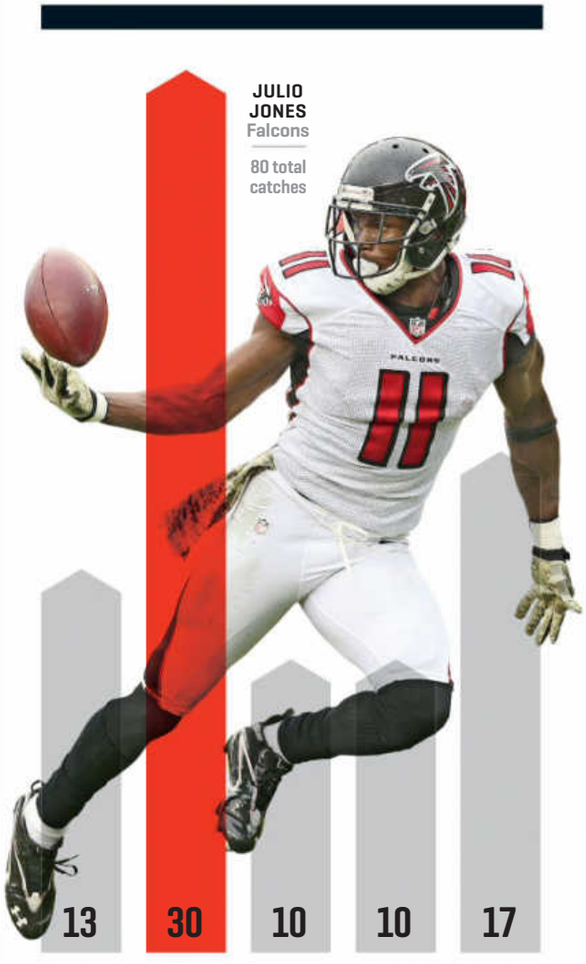
DeANDRE HOPKINS
Texans
71 total catches



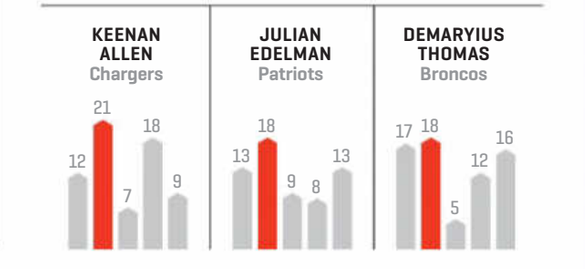
LEFT NUMBERS TO HASHMARKS

21.5%

This season Julio Jones owns this segment of the field, an area that saw a 28 percent increase in balls caught from 2009 to 2014.



JULIO JONES
Falcons
80 total catches



OVER THE

9.7

OF BALLS BETWEEN THE

Golden Tate and Pierre Garcon lead ESPN Insider and former Bucs GM have spread out, linebackers have cover tight ends, close on slot

RECEPTIONS
-24.8%

WRs WITH 15+ RECEPTIONS
-81.8%

FROM LEFT: PHELAN M. EBENHACK/AP IMAGES; DANIEL GLUSKOTER/ICON SPORTSWIRE

RRED G LANES

—change. In 2015, wide fewer balls over the middle are all those passes going?

KNOX

MIDDLE

7%

ARE CAUGHT HASHMARKS

receivers here with a scant 11 catches. Mark Dominik says that as offenses become smaller and quicker to better receivers and own the middle.

TOUCHDOWNS

-30.8%

PCT OF RECEPTIONS

-32.9%

Decreases from 2009 to 2014 seasons.

RIGHT NUMBERS TO HASHMARKS

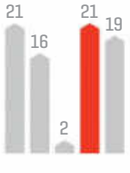
21.1%

Receivers are projected to catch 1,361 balls in this zone this season, the highest total in six years, after a slight dip last season.

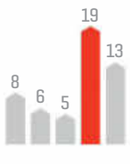


LARRY FITZGERALD
Cardinals
65 total catches

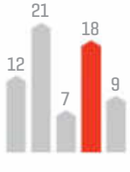
ANTONIO BROWN
Steelers



MICHAEL CRABTREE
Raiders



KEENAN ALLEN
Chargers



OUTSIDE RIGHT NUMBERS

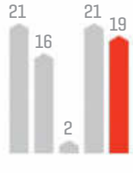
24.4%

A.J. Green, like the NFL receiving corps as a whole, does his best work in this fifth of the field, which has seen a 10 percent bump in balls caught the past two seasons.

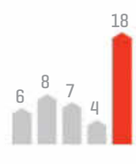


A.J. GREEN
Bengals
55 total catches

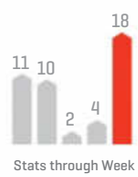
ANTONIO BROWN
Steelers



T.Y. HILTON
Colts



ALLEN ROBINSON
Jaguars



Stats through Week 10.

FROM LEFT: CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES; TOM DIPACE/AP IMAGES



A SHOW OF HANDS

No body part is more integral to an athlete's success than a receiver's hands. Texans breakout star DeAndre Hopkins and Tom Brady's temporarily sidelined top target, Julian Edelman, help us get a grip on their mitts.

INTERVIEWS BY MORTY AIN AND STACEY PRESSMAN



DeANDRE HOPKINS | **CATCHES THIS SEASON** 71* | **YPC** 13.1 | **CATCH RATE THIS SEASON** 58%

I think I have the best hands in the NFL. Not because I'm full of myself, but I think if you look at drops over the past three years, I'd say I'm at the top of that list. *[Hopkins is right—he grabbed 97 percent of catchable passes in his first two years, best in the league.]*

I remember my more spectacular catches exactly—like last year against the Giants. It was with my left hand, and I really couldn't get a grip on the ball, so I caught it with only three fingers. On the sidelines, my teammates were like, "Did I really just see that?"

My first hand injury was in eighth grade. My thumb got jammed when a defender hit it with his helmet. I didn't realize it was broken until the next play—it looked like a little nub, it was so far back in my skin. I had to get two pins in it.

These calluses aren't going away—I've been a wide receiver since I was 15 years old. And every quarterback I've had threw a pretty hard ball. Ryan Mallett [a Texans QB last season] probably had the hardest ball I've caught in my years of playing football.

My pinkie tends to pop out of place a lot while I'm playing—I just pop it back in. I notice it when I move my hand and it feels stiff. I mean, it's been happening my whole life. It's never broken—just pops out of place real easy.

*All stats through Week 10.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DYLAN COULTER
STYLING: JULIE WHITMIRE



JULIAN EDELMAN | **CATCHES THIS SEASON** 61 | **YPC** 11.3 | **CATCH RATE THIS SEASON** 70%

I've broken my pinkie a lot over the years—from a young age through college to the NFL. Banging it up, getting it caught in face masks, falling on it wrong—it's pretty tough now. I call it the "hook." It'll be all right. Plus, it's just a pinkie. I don't need it.

My hand strength might be genetic—my dad is a mechanic, my grandfather was a bricklayer, so potentially that strength could have been passed down. I'm pretty girthy like my grandfather was.

The first ball I caught from Tom Brady was in OTAs. The coaching point of the day was to catch the ball and turn inside. I was a rookie, young and dumb, and caught the ball and turned *out* to hear Brady yelling at me. I was pretty terrified—it's Tom Brady!

I've broken my hand and fingers, radiuses, both forearm bones. With your fingers, unless it's your thumb, you can play with them; it's just pain tolerance. *[His recently broken foot is less tolerable, likely sidelining him until the playoffs.]*

I'll strengthen my fingers with rice three or four times a week: You do swishing motions through the rice, piano stabs, thumb rolls, dig to the bottom. It works all these neglected muscles in the hands and forearms, getting them nice and tight.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER HAPAK





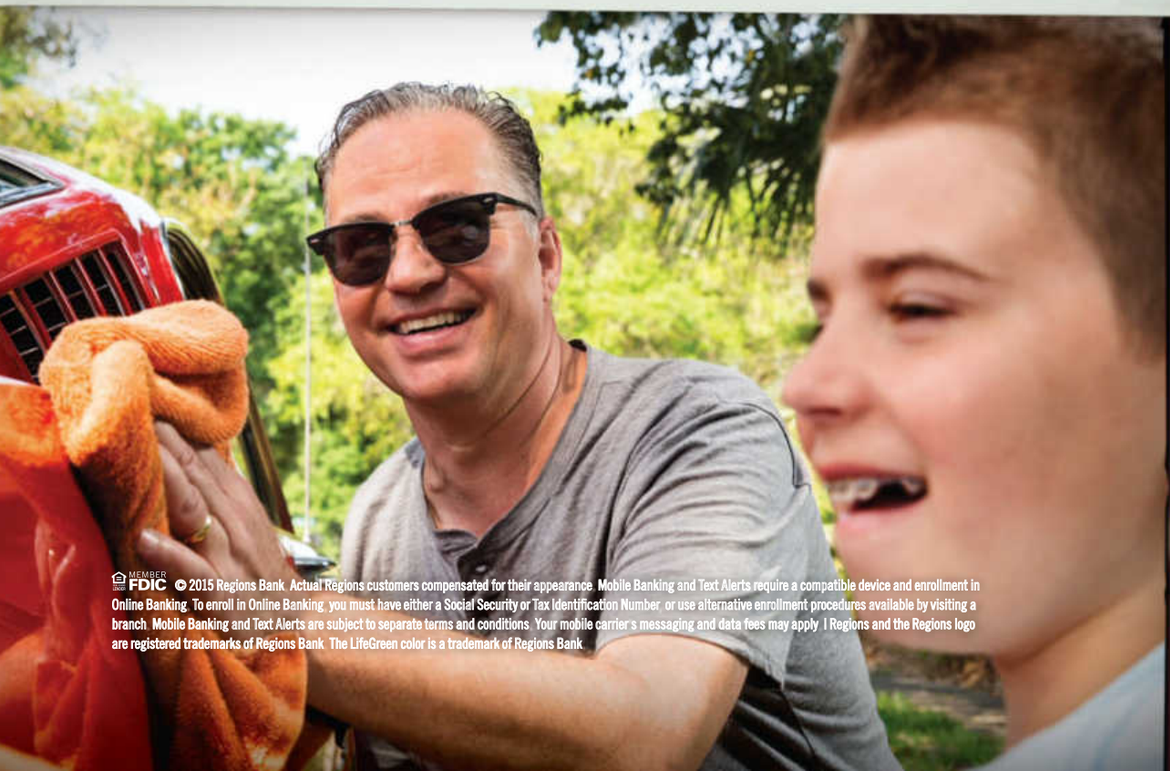
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BY HOWARD BRYANT



Are You Ready for Some Patriotism? Military tributes have become as common in sports as the national anthem, but at a price that's hidden in more ways than one.

The influence of the military represents the most significant and uncomfortable change in sports in post-9/11 America. Significant because the game, on TV and at the stadium, has been awash in military overtones since the destruction of the World Trade Center, and uncomfortable because the root of the change has been an unstable metastasizing of fear, nationalism, patriotism—and especially commerce. Like *green* and *organic*, *patriotism* has devolved into a lucrative *Good Housekeeping* seal for marketers everywhere.

Sporting events often resemble exhibitions sponsored by the Pentagon. The New York Mets and San Diego Padres routinely wear camouflage alternate jerseys. Football coaches wear camo gear and headsets. Sections of uniformed military personnel receive gratuitous camera time. Instead of patriotic, sports feel inauthentic, pandering, manipulative.

Two Republican senators from Arizona—Vietnam veteran John McCain and junior senator Jeff Flake—recently released a report explaining the underside of stadium patriotism: For the past few years, the U.S. Department of Defense and the major sports leagues have embedded military-themed programs into the game-day experience, not for goodwill, not in support of the troops, but for money. McCain and Flake call it "paid patriotism" and say the DOD has spent at least $53 million of taxpayer money on at least 50 teams to stage these events, hoping to recruit new soldiers while duping fans into believing these gestures are voluntary expressions of teams' gratitude for returning soldiers. The two senators have drafted laws to make it stop. "It is time to allow major sports teams' legitimate tributes to our soldiers to shine with national pride rather than being cast under the pallor of marketing gimmicks paid for by American taxpayers," the 145-page report notes.

The U.S. remains involved in two armed conflicts, each more than a dozen years old. Terrorism fears allow the military presence in the culture to exist unquestioned, and those who do question it risk accusations of anti-Americanism. Still, McCain and Flake are correct: The public is being robbed of its tax money and its trust, and soldiers are being used. Following the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, according to the report, the DOD paid the Patriots $700,000 of taxpayer money to stage military-themed events; the Red Sox were paid $100,000; the Celtics and Bruins took $195,000 and $280,000. The Wisconsin Army National Guard paid the Brewers $49,000 to play "God Bless America" at games in 2014 during the seventh-inning stretch. The Atlanta Falcons held a surprise homecoming during a game. The fans cheered, but the reunion wasn't organic or voluntary. The DOD has paid the Falcons $879,000 of taxpayer money since 2012 for the privilege. The TV shots of veterans and outfield-sized American flags look great. The announcers talk about honoring service. McCain and Flake say the practices are legal but morally fraudulent.

There is not just deceit in these practices but also an insulting distortion of history and images. The Chicago Blackhawks ostensibly honored Veterans Day with a camouflage jersey containing the Blackhawks' logo in the center, clearly uninterested in the colliding imagery—the systematic removal of native tribes occurred at the hands of the U.S. Army. Since 9/11, America has conflated the armed forces with first responders, creating a mishmash of anthem-singing cops and surprise homecomings in a time of Ferguson and militarized police. Tensions mount in aggrieved communities, yet the LA Dodgers pandered to police by holding Law Enforcement Appreciation Night in September.

The leagues dispute the idea that they are misleading the public; MLB says the cost for promotional events exceeds what it charges the military and is encouraging teams to "take steps to avoid any appearance that they are being paid by a military organization for any such ceremonies." Regardless, what McCain and Flake want is transparency, and after 14 years of war, it has all gone too far. The real question is why both sides—the military and the billion-dollar sports industry—feel this embedding is necessary. Maybe fans should again be allowed to watch a game without having to guess when they're being recruited by the National Guard, and maybe instead of billionaires profiting off veterans, the best way to honor returning soldiers is to hire them.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK SMITH

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